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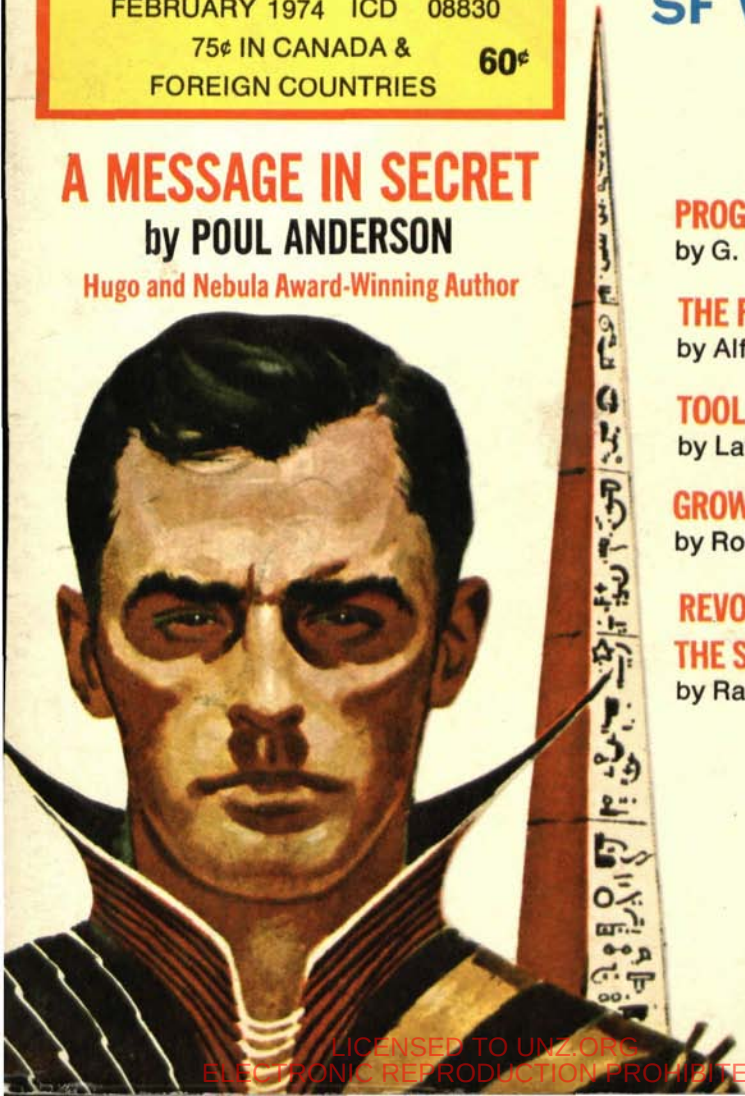

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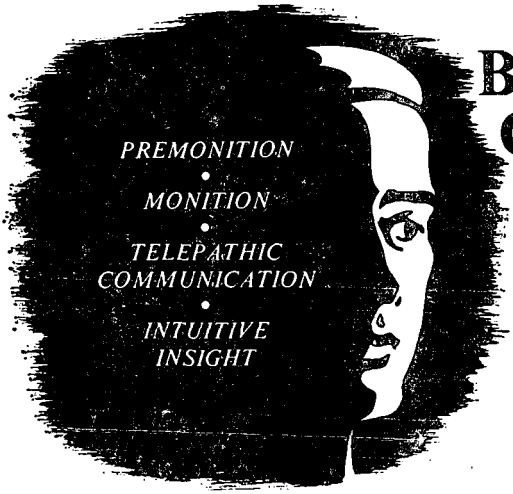


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# A MESSAGE IN SECRET

By POUL ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED by VARGA

***The Tower rose monstrously from the barren plain, a symbol for all Altai. And Flandry, caught in a web of cosmic intrigue, trapped between the henchmen of Yesukai and the reluctant Tebtengri, cleaved to the Tower at the moment of truth.***

SEEN on approach, against crystal darkness and stars crowded into foreign constellations, Altai was beautiful. More than half the northern hemisphere, somewhat less in the south, was polar cap. Snowfields were tinged rosy by the sun Krasna; naked ice shimmered blue and cold green. The tropical belt, steppe and tundra, which covered the remainder, shaded from bronze to tarnished gold, here and there the quicksilver flash of a big lake. Altai was ringed like Saturn, a tawny hoop with subtle rainbow iridescence flung spinning around the equator, three ra-



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dii out in space. And beyond were two copper-coin moons.

Captain Sir Dominic Flandry, field agent, Naval Intelligence Corps of the Terrestrial Empire, pulled his gaze reluctantly back to the spaceship's bridge. "I see where its name came from," he remarked. *Altai* meant *Golden* in the language of the planet's human colonists; or so the Betelgeusean trader who passed on his knowledge electronically to Flandry had insisted. "But Krasna is a misnomer for the sun. It isn't really red to the human eye. Not nearly as much as your star, for instance. More of an orange-yellow, I'd say."

The blue visage of Zalat, skipper of the battered merchant vessel, twisted into the grimace which was his race's equivalent of a shrug. He was moderately humanoid, though only half as tall as a man, stout, hairless, clad in a metal mesh tunic. "I zuppoze it was de, you zay, contrazt." He spoke Terrestrial Anglic with a thick accent, as if to show that the independence of the Betelgeusean System—buffer state between the hostile realms of Terra and Merseia—did not mean isolation from the mainstream of interstellar culture.

Flandry would rather have practiced his Altaian, especially since Zalat's Anglic vocabulary was so small as to limit conversation to platitudes. But he deferred. As the sole passenger on this ship, of alien species at that, with correspondingly special requirements in diet, he depended on the captain's good will. Also, Betelgeuseans take him at face value. Officially, he was only being sent to re-establish contact between Altai and the rest of mankind. Officially, his mission was so minor that Terra didn't even give him a ship of his own, but left him to negotiate passage as best he might . . . So, let Zalat chatter.

"After all," continued the master, "Altai was firzt colonized more dan zeven hoondert Terra-years a-pazt: in de verry dawn, you say, of interztellar travel. Little was known about w'at to eggzpect. Krazna muzt have been deprezzingly cold and red, after Zol. Now-to-days, we have more aztronautical zophiztication."

Flandry looked to the blaze of space, stars and stars and stars. He thought that an estimated four million of them, included in that vague sphere called the Terrestrial Empire, was an insignificant portion of



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this one spiral arm of this one commonplace galaxy. Even if you added the other empires, the sovereign suns like Betelgeuse, the reports of a few explorers who had gone extremely far in the old days, that part of the universe known to man was terrifyingly small, And it would always remain so.

"Just how often do you come here?" he asked, largely to drown out silence.

"About onze a Terra-year," answered Zalat. "However, dere is ot'er merchantz on dis route. I have de fur trade, but Altai alzo produzes gemz, mineralz, hides, variouz organic productz, even dried meatz, w'ich are in zome demand at home. Zo dere is usually a Betelgeusean zhip or two at Ulan Baligh."

"Will you be here long?"

"I hope not. It iz a tediouz plaze for a nonhuman. One pleasure houze for uz has been eztablizshed, but—" Zalat made another face. "Wid de dizturbanzes going on, fur trapping and caravans have been much hampered. Lazt time I had to wait a ztandard mont' for a full cargo. Diz time may be worze."

*Oh-ho,* thought Flandry. But he merely asked aloud: "Since the metals and machinery you bring in exchange are so valuable, I wonder why some Altaians don't acquire spaceships of their own and start trading."

"Dey have not dat kind of zivilization," Zalat replied. "Remember, our people have been coming here for lezz dan a zentury. Before den Altai was izolated, onze de original zhipz had been worn out. Dere was never zo great an interezt among dem in re-eztablizhing galactic contact az would overcome de handicap of poverty in metalz w'ich would have made zpazezship building eggzpenzive for dem. By now, might-be, zome of de younger Altaian malez have zome wizh for zuch an enterprize. But lately de Kha Khan has forbidden any of his zubjectz from leaving de planet, eggzept zome truzted and verry cloze-mout' perzonal reprezentatives in de Betelgeuzean Zyztem. Dis prohibition is might-be one reazon for de inzurrectionz."

"Yeh." Flandry gave the ice fields a hard look. "If it were my planet, I think I'd look around for an enemy to sell it to."

*And still I'm going there,* he thought. *Talk about your unsung heroes—! Though I suppose, the more the Empire cracks and crumbles, the more frantically a few of us have*



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*to scurry around patching it. Or else the Long Night could come in our own sacrosanct lifetimes.*

*And in this particular instance,* his mind ran on, *I have reason to believe that an enemy is trying to buy the planet.*

Where the Zeya and the Talyma, broad shallow rivers winding southward over the steppes from polar snows, met at Ozero Rurik, the city named Ulan Baligh was long ago founded. It had never been large, and now, the only permanent human settlement on Altai, had perhaps 20,000 residents. But there was always a ring of encampments around it, tribesmen come to trade or confer or hold rites in the Prophet's Tower. Their tents and trunks walled the landward side of Ulan Baligh, spilled around the primitive spaceport, and raised campfire smoke for many kilometers along the indigo lakeshore.

As the spaceship descended, Captain Flandry was more interested in something less picturesque. Through a magnifying viewport in the after turret, to which he had bribed his way, he saw that monorail tracks encircled the city like spider strands; that unmistakable launchers for heavy missiles squatted on them; that some highly efficient modern military aircraft lazed on grav repulsors in the sky; that barracks and emplacements for an armored brigade were under construction to the west, numerous tanks and beetle-cars already prowling on guard; that a squat building in the center of town must house a negagrav generator powerful enough to shield the entire urban area.

That all of this was new.

That none of it came from any factories controlled by Terra.

"But quite probably from our little green chums," he murmured to himself. "A Merseian base here, in the buffer region outflanking us at Catawrayannis . . . Well, it wouldn't be decisive in itself, but it would strengthen their hand quite a bit. And eventually, when their hand looks strong enough, they're going to fight."

He suppressed a tinge of bitterness at his own people, too rich to spend treasure in an open attack on the menace —most of them, even, denying that any menace existed, for what would dare break the Pax Terrestria? After all, he thought wryly, he enjoyed his furloughs Home precisely because Terra was decadent.



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But for now, there was work at hand. Intelligence had collected hints in the Betelgeuse region: traders spoke of curious goings-on at some place named Altai; the archives mentioned a colony far off the regular space lanes, not so much lost as overlooked; inquiry produced little more than this, for Betelgeusean civilians like Zalat had no interest in Altaian affairs beyond the current price of angora pelts.

A proper investigation would have required some hundreds of men and several months. Being spread horribly thin over far too many stars, Intelligence was able to ship just one man to Betelgeuse. At the Terran Embassy, Flandry received a slim dossier, a stingy expense account, and orders to find what the devil was behind all this. After which, overworked men and machines forgot about him. They would remember when he reported back, or if he died in some spectacular fashion; otherwise, Altai might well lie obscure for another decade.

*Which could be a trifle too long,* Flandry thought.

He strolled with elaborate casualness from the turret to his cabin. It must not be suspected on Altai what he had already seen: or, if that information leaked out, it must absolutely not be suspected that *he* suspected these new installations involved more than suppressing a local rebellion. The Khan had been careless about hiding the evidence, presumably not expecting a Terran investigator. He would certainly not be so careless as to let the investigator take significant information home again.

At his cabin, Flandry dressed with his usual care. According to report, the Altaians were people after his own heart: they liked color on their clothes, in great gobs. He chose a shimmerite blouse, green embroidered vest, purple trousers with gold stripe tucked into tooled-leather half boots, crimson sash and cloak, black beret slanted rakishly over his sleek seal-brown hair. He himself was a tall well-muscled man; his long face bore high cheekbones and straight nose, gray eyes, neat mustache. But then, he patronized Terra's best cosmetic biosculptor.

The spaceship landed at one end of the concrete field. Another Betelgeusean vesel towered opposite, confirming Zalat's claims about the trade. Not precisely brisk—maybe a score of ships per standard year—but continuous, and



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doubtless by now important to the planet's economy.

As he stepped out the debarkation lock, Flandry felt the exhilaration of a gravity only three-fourths that of Home. But it was quickly lost when the air stung him. Ulan Baligh lay at eleven degrees north latitude. With an axial tilt about like Terra's, a wan dwarf sun, no oceans to moderate the climate, Altai knew seasons almost to the equator. The northern hemisphere was approaching winter. A wind streaking off the pole sheathed Flandry in chill, hooted around his ears and snatched the beret from his head.

He grabbed it back, swore, and confronted the portmaster with less dignity than he had planned. "Greeting," he said as instructed; "may peace dwell in your yurt. This person is named Dominic Flandry, and ranges Terra, the Empire."

The Altaian blinked narrow black eyes, but otherwise kept his face a mask. It was a wide, rather flat countenance, but not purely mongoloid: hook nose, thick close-cropped beard, light skin bespoke caucasoid admixture as much as the hybrid language. He was short, heavy-set, a wide-brimmed fur hat was tied in place, his leather jacket was lacquered in an intricate design, his pants were of thick felt and his boots fleece-lined. An old-style machine pistol was holstered at his left side, a broad-bladed knife on the right.

"We have not had such visitors—" he paused, collected himself, and bowed. "Be welcome, all guests who come with honest words," he said ritually. "This person is named Pyotr Gutchluk, of the Kha Khan's sworn men." He turned to Zalat. "You and your crew may proceed directly to the yamen. We can handle the formalities later. I must personally conduct so distinguished a . . . a guest to the palace."

He clapped his hands. A couple of servants appeared, men of his own race, similarly dressed and similarly armed. Their eyes glittered, seldom leaving the Terran; the woodenness of their faces must cover an excitement which seethed. Flandry's luggage was loaded on a small electrotruck of antique design. Pyotr Gutchluk said, half inquiringly, "Of course so great an orluk as yourself would prefer a varyak to a tulyak."

"Of course," said Flandry, wishing his education had included those terms.

He discovered that a varyak was a native-made motorcycle.



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At least, that was the closest Terran word. It was a massive thing on two wheels, smoothly powered from a bank of energy capacitors, a baggage rack aft and a machine-gun mount forward. It was steered with the knees, which touched a crossbar. Other controls were on a manual panel behind the windscreen. An outrigger wheel could be lowered for support when the vehicle was stationary or moving slowly. Pyotr Gutchluk offered goggled crash helmets from a saddlebag and took off at 200 kilometers an hour.

Flandry, accelerating his own varyak, felt the wind come around the screen, slash his face and nearly drag him from the saddle. He started to slow down. But—*Come now, old chap. Imperial prestige, stiff upper lip, and so on drearily.* Somehow he managed to stay on Gutchluk's tail as they roared into the city.

Ulan Baligh formed a crescent, where the waters of Ozero Rurik cut a bay into the flat shore. Overhead was a deep-blue sky, and the rings. Pale by day, they made a frosty halo above the orange sun. In such a light, the steeply upcurving red tile roofs took on the color of fresh blood. Even the ancient gray stone walls beneath were tinged faint crimson. All the buildings were large, residences holding several families each, commercial ones jammed with tiny shops. The streets were wide, clean-swept, full of nomads and the wind. Gutchluk took an overhead road, suspended from pylons cast like dragons holding the cables in their teeth. It seemed an official passageway, nearly empty save for an occasional varyak patrol.

It also gave a clear view of the palace, standing in walled gardens: a giant version of the other houses, but gaudily painted and colonnaded with wooden dragons. The royal residence was, however, overshadowed by the Prophet's Tower. So was everything else.

Flandry understood from vague Betelgeusean descriptions that most of Altai professed a sort of Moslem-Buddhist synthesis, codified centuries ago by the Prophet Subotai. The religion had only this one temple, but that was enough. A sheer two kilometers it reared, up into the thin hurried air as if it would spear a moon. Basically a pagoda, blinding red, it had one blank wall facing north. No, not blank either, but a single flat tablet on which, in a contorted Sino-Cyrillic alphabet,



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the words of the Prophet stood holy forever. Even Flandry, with scant reverence in his heart, knew a moment's awe. A stupendous will had raised that spire above these plains.

The elevated road swooped downward again. Gutchluk's varyak slammed to a halt outside the palace. Flandry, taller than any man of Altai, was having trouble with his steering bar. He almost crashed into the wrought-bronze gate. He untangled his legs and veered in bare time, a swerve that nearly threw him. Up on the wall, a guard leaned on his portable rocket launcher and laughed. Flandry heard him and swore. He continued the curve, steered a ring around Gutchluk so tight that it could easily have killed them both, slapped down the third wheel and let the cycle slow itself to a halt while he leaped from the saddle and took a bow.

"By the Ice People!" exclaimed Gutchluk. Sweat shone on his face. He wiped it off with a shaky hand. "They breed reckless men on Terra!"

"Oh, no," said Flandry, wishing he dared mop his own wet skin. "A bit demonstrative, perhaps, but never reckless."

Once again he had occasion to thank loathed hours of calisthenics and judo practice for a responsive body. As the gates opened—Gutchluk had used his panel radio to call ahead—Flandry jumped back on his varyak and putt-putted through under the guard's awed gaze.

The garden was rocks, arched bridges, dwarf trees and mutant lichen. Little that was Terran would grow on Altai. Flandry began to feel the dryness of his own nose and throat. This air snatched moisture from him as greedily as it did heat. He was more grateful for the warmth inside the palace than he wished to admit.

A white-bearded man in fur-trimmed robe made a deep bow. "The Kha Khan himself bids you welcome, Orluk Flandry," he said. "He will see you at once."

"But the gifts I brought—"

"No matter now, my lord." The chamberlain bowed again, turned and let the way down arched corridors hung with tapestries. It was very silent: servants scurried about whispering, guards with modern blasters stood rigid in dragon-faced leather tunics and goggled helmets, tripods fumed bitter incense. The entire sprawling house seemed to crouch, watchful.



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*I imagine I have upset them somewhat,* thought Flandry. *Here they have some cozy little conspiracy—with beings sworn to lay all Terra waste, I suspect—and suddenly a Terran officer drops in, for the first time in five or six hundred years. Yes-s-s.*

*So what do they do next? It's their move.*

Oleg Yesukai, Kha Khan of All the Tribes, was bigger than most Altaians, with a long sharp face and a stiff reddish beard. He wore gold rings, a robe thickly embroidered, silver trim on his fur cap, but all with an air of impatient concession to tedious custom. The hand which Flandry, kneeling, touched to his brow, was hard and muscular; the gun at the royal waist had seen use. This private audience chamber was curtained in red, its furniture inlaid and grotesquely carved; but it also held an ultramodern Betelgeusean graphone and a desk buried under official papers.

"Be seated," said the Khan. He himself took a low-legged chair and opened a carved bone cigar box. A smile of sorts bent his mouth. "Now that we've gotten rid of all my damned fool courtiers, we need no longer act as if you were a vassal." He took a crooked purple stogie from the box. "I would offer you one of these, but it might make you ill. In thirty-odd generations, eating Altaian food, we have probably changed our metabolism a bit."

"Your majesty is most gracious." Flandry inhaled a cigaret of his own to lighting and relaxed as much as the straightbacked furniture permitted.

Oleg Khan spoke a stockbreeder's pungent obscenity. "Gracious? My father was an outlaw on the tundra at fifteen." (He meant local years, a third again as long as Terra's. Altai was about one A.U. distant from Krasna, but the sun was less massive than Sol.) "At thirty he had seized Ulan Baligh with 50,000 warriors and deposited old Tuli Khan naked on the arctic snows: so as not to shed royal blood, you understand. But he never would live here, and all his sons grew up in the ordu, the encampment, as he had done, practiced war against the Tebtengri as he had known war, and mastered reading, writing, and science to boot. Let us not bother with graciousness, Orluk Flandry, I never had time to learn any."

The Terran waited passive. It seemed to disconcert Oleg, who smoked for a minute in



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short ferocious drags, then leaned forward and said, "Well, why does your government finally deign to notice us?"

"I had the impression, your majesty," said Flandry in a mild voice, "that the colonists of Altai came this far from Sol in order to escape notice."

"True. True. Don't believe that rat crud in the hero songs. Our ancestors came here because they were weak, not strong. Planets where men could settle at all were rare enough to make each one a prize, and there was little law in those days. By going far and picking a wretched icy desert, a few shiploads of Central Asians avoided having to fight for their home. Nor did they plan to become herdsmen. They tried to farm, but it proved impossible. Too cold and dry, among other things. They could not build an industrial, food-synthesizing society either: not enough heavy metals, fossil fuels, fissionables. This is a low-density planet, you know. Step by step, over generations, with only dim traditions to guide them, they were forced to evolve a nomadic life. And that was suited to Altai; that worked, and their numbers increased. Of course, legends have grown up. Most of my people still believe Terra is some kind of lost utopia and our ancestors were hardy warriors." Oleg's rust-colored eyes narrowed upon Flandry. He stroked his beard. "I've read enough, thought enough, to have a fair idea of what your Empire is—and what it can do. So—why this visit, at this exact moment?"

"We are no longer interested in conquest for its own sake, your majesty," said Flandry. True, as far as it went. "And our merchants have avoided this sector for several reasons. It lies far from heartland stars; the Betelgeuseans, close to their own home, can compete on unequal terms; the risk of meeting some prowling warship of our Merseian enemies is unattractive. There has, in short, been no occasion, military or civilian, to search out Altai." He slipped smoothly into prevarication gear. "However, it is not the Emperor's wish that any members of the human family be cut off. At the very least, I bring you his brotherly greetings." (That was subversive. It should have been "fatherly." But Oleg Khan would not take kindly to being patronized.) "At most, if Altai wishes to rejoin us, for mutual protection and other bene-



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fits, there are many possibilities which could be discussed. An Imperial resident, say, to offer help and advice—"

He let the proposal trail off, since in point of fact a resident's advice tended to be, "I suggest you do thus and so lest I call in the Marines."

The Altaian king surprised him by not getting huffy about sovereign status. Instead, amiable as a tiger, Oleg Yesukai answered: "If you are distressed about our internal difficulties, pray do not be. Nomadism necessarily means tribalism, which usually means feud and war. I already spoke of my father's clan seizing planetary leadership from the Nuru Bator. We in turn have rebellious gur-khans. As you will hear in court, that alliance called the Tebtengri Shamanate is giving us trouble. But such is nothing new in Altaian history. Indeed, I have a firmer hold over more of the planet than any Kha Khan since the Prophet's day. In a little while more I shall bring every last clan to heel."

"With the help of imported armament?" Flandry elevated his brows a millimeter. Risky though it was to admit having seen the evidence, it might be still more suspicious not to. And indeed the other man seemed unruffled. Flandry continued, "The Imperium would gladly send a technical mission."

"I do not doubt it." Oleg's response was dry.

"May I respectfully ask what planet supplies the assistance your majesty is now receiving?"

"Your question is impertinent, as well you know. I do not take offense, but I decline to answer." Confidentially: "The old mercantile treaties with Betelgeuse guarantee monopolies in certain exports to their traders. This other race is taking payment in the same articles. I am not bound by oaths sworn by the Nuru Bator dynasty, but at present it would be inexpedient that Betelgeuse discover the facts."

It was a good spur-of-the-moment lie: so good that Flandry hoped Oleg would believe he had fallen for it. He assumed a fatuous Look-Mom-I'm-a-man-of-the-world smirk. "I understand, great Khan. You may rely on Terrestrial discretion."

"I hope so," said Oleg humorously. "Our traditional punishment for spies involves a method to keep them alive for days after they have been flayed."

Flandry's gulp was calculated, but not altogether faked.



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"It is best to remind your majesty," he said, "just in case some of your less well-educated citizens should act impulsively, that the Imperial Navy is under standing orders to redress any wrong suffered by any Terran national anywhere in the universe."

"Very rightly," said Oleg. His tone made clear his knowledge that that famous rule had become a dead letter, except as an occasional excuse for bombarding some obstreperous world unable to fight back. Between the traders, his own study missions sent to Betelgeuse, and whoever was arming him—the Kha Khan had become as unmercifully well-informed about galactic politics as any Terran aristocrat.

Or Merseian. The realization was chilling. Flandry had perforce gone blind into his assignment. Only now, piece by piece, did he see how big and dangerous it was.

"A sound policy," continued Oleg. "But let us be perfectly frank, Orluk. If you should suffer, let us say, accidental harm in my dominions—and *if* your masters should misinterpret the circumstances, though of course they would not—I should be forced to invoke assistance which is quite readily available."

*Merseia isn't far,* thought Flandry, *and Intelligence knows they've massed naval units at their closest base. If I want to hoist Terran vintages again, I'd better start acting the fool as never before in a gloriously misspent life.*"

Aloud, a hint of bluster: "Betelgeuse has treaties with the Imperium, your majesty. They would not interfere in a purely interhuman dispute!" And then, as if appalled at himself: "But surely there won't be any. The, uh, conversation has, uh, taken an undesirable turn. Most unfortunate, your majesty! I was, ah, am interested in, er, unusual human colonies, and it was suggested to me by an archivist that—"

And so on and so on.

Oleg Yesukai grinned.

Altai rotated once in 35 hours. The settlers had adapted, and Flandry was used to postponing sleep. He spent the afternoon being guided around Ulan Baligh, asking silly questions which he felt sure his guides would relay to the Khan. The practice of four or five meals during the long day —his were offered in the town houses of chieftains belonging to Clan Yesukai—gave him a chance to build up the role of a young Terran fop who had wangled this assignment from



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an uninterested Imperium, simply for a lark. A visit to one of the joyhouses, operated for transient nomads, helped reinforce the impression. Also, it was fun.

Emerging after sunset, he saw the Prophet's Tower turned luminous, so that it stood like a bloody lance over brawling, flicker-lit streets. The tablet wall was white, the words thereon in jet: two kilometers of precepts for a stern and bitter way of life. "I say," he exclaimed, "we haven't toured that yet. Let's go."

The chief guide, a burly gray warrior leathered by decades of wind and frost, looked uneasy. "We must hasten back to the palace, Orluk," he said. "A banquet is being prepared."

"Oh, fine. Fine! Though I I don't know how much of an orgy I'm in any shape for after this bout. Eh, what?" Flandry nudged the man's ribs with an indecent thumb. "Still, a peek inside, really I must. It's unbelievable, that skyscraper, don't you know."

"We must first cleanse ourselves."

A young man added bluntly: "In no case could it be allowed. You are not an initiate, and there is no holier spot in all the stars."

"Oh, well, in that case— Mind if I photograph it tomorrow?"

"Yes," said the young man. "It is not forbidden, perhaps, but we could not be responsible for what the ordinary tribesman who saw you with your camera might do. None but the Tebtengri would look on the Tower with anything but reverent eyes."

"Teb—"

"Rebels and heathen, up in the north." The older man touched brow and lips, a sign against evil. "Magic-workers at Tengri Nor, traffickers with the Ice People. It is not well to speak of them, only to exterminate them. Now we must hasten, Orluk."

"Oh, yes. Yes. To be sure. Yes, indeed." Flandry scrambled into the tulyak, an open motor carriage with a dragon figurehead.

As he was driven to the palace, he weighed what he knew in an uncomforting balance. Something was going on, much bigger than a local war. Oleg Khan had no intention Terra should hear about it. A Terran agent who actually learned a bit of truth would not go home alive; only a well-born idiot could safely be allowed return passage. Whether or not Flandry could convince the Altaians he was that idiot, re-



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mained to be seen. It wouldn't be easy, for certainly he must probe deeper.

*Furthermore, my lad, if somehow you do manage to swirl your cloak, twiddle your mustache, and gallop off to call an Imperial task force, Oleg may sumon his friends. They are obviously not a private gun-selling concern, as he wants me to think; all Altai couldn't produce enough trade goods to pay for that stuff. So, if the friends get here first and decide to protect this military investment of theirs, there's going to be a fight. And with them dug in on the surface, as well as cruising local space, they'll have all the advantages. The Navy won't thank you, lad, if you drag them into a losing campaign.*

He kindled a fresh cigaret and wondered miserably why he hadn't told HQ he was down with Twonk's Disease.

The valet assigned to him, at his guest suite in the palace, was a little puzzled by Terran garments. Flandry spent half an hour choosing his own ensemble. At last, much soothed, he followed an honor guard, who carried bared daggers in their hands, to the banquet hall, where he was placed at the Khan's right.

There was no table. A great stone trough stretched the length of the hall, a hundred men sitting cross-legged on either side. Broth, reminiscent of won-ton soup but with a sharp taste, was poured into it from wheeled kettles. When next the Khan signalled, the soup was drained through traps, spigots flushed the trough clean, and even less identifiable solid dishes were shoveled in. Meanwhile cups of hot, powerfully alcoholic herb tea were kept filled, a small orchestra caterwauled on pipes and drums, and there were some fairly spectacular performances by varyak riders, knife dancers, acrobats, and marksmen. At the meal's end, an old tribal bard stood up and chanted lays; a plump and merry little man was summoned from the bazaars downtown to tell his original stories; gifts from the Khan were given every man present; and the affair broke up. Not a word of conversation had been spoken.

*Oh, well, I'm sure everyone else had a hilarious time,* Flandry grumbled to himself.

Not quite sober, he followed his guards back to his apartment. The valet bade him goodnight and closed the thick fur drapes which served for internal doors.

There was a radiant globe



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illuminating the room, but it seemed feeble next to the light filling a glazed balcony window. Flandry opened this and looked out in wonder.

Beneath him lay the darkened city. Past twinkling red campfires, Ozero Rurik stretched in blackness and multiple moon-shivers, out to an unseen horizon. On his left the Prophet's Tower leaped up, a perpetual flame crowned with unwinking winter-brilliant stars. Both moons were near the full, ruddy discs six and eight times as broad to the eye as Luna, haloed by ice crystals. Their light drenched the plains, turned the Zeya and Talyma into ribbons of mercury. But the rings dominated all else, bridging the southern sky with pale rainbows. Second by second, thin firestreaks crossed heaven up there, as meteoric particles from that huge double band hurtled into the atmosphere.

Flandry was not much for gaping at landscapes. But this time it took minutes for him to realize how frigid the air was.

He turned back to the comparative warmth of his suite. As he closed the window, a woman entered from the bedroom.

Flandry had expected some such hospitality. He saw that she was taller than most Altaians, with long blue-black hair and lustrous tilted eyes of a greenish hue rare on this planet. Otherwise a veil and a gold-stiffened cloak hid her. She advanced quickly, till she was very near him, and he waited for some token of submission.

Instead, she stood watching him for close to a minute. It grew so still in the room that he heard the wind on the lake. Shadows were thick in the corners, and the dragons and warriors on the tapestries appeared to stir.

Finally, in a low uneven voice, she said: "Orluk, are you indeed a spy from the Mother of Men?"

"Spy?" Flandry thought, horrified about *agents provocateurs*. "Good cosmos, no! I mean, that is to say, nothing of the sort!"

She laid a hand on his wrist. The fingers were cold, and clasped him with frantic strength. Her other hand slipped the veil aside. He looked upon a broad fair-skinned face, delicately arched nose, full mouth and firm chin: handsome rather than pretty. She whispered, so fast and fiercely he had trouble following:

"Whatever you are, you



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must listen! If you are no warrior, then give the word when you go home to those who are. I am Bourtai Ivanskaya of the Tumurji folk, who belonged to the Tebtengri Shamanate. Surely you have heard speak of them, enemies of Oleg, driven into the north but still at war with him. My father was a noyon, a division commander, well known to Juchi Ilyak. He fell at the battle of Rivers Meet, last year, where the Yesukai men took our whole ordu. I was brought here alive, partly as a hostage—" A flare of haughtiness: "As if that could influence my people!—and partly for the Kha Khan's harem. Since then I have gained a little of his confidence. More important, I have my own connections now, the harem is always a center of intrigue, nothing is secret from it for very long, but much which is secret begins there—"

"I know," said Flandry. He was stunned, almost overwhelmed, but could not help adding: "Bedfellows make strange politics."

She blinked incomprehension and plunged on: "I heard today that a Terran envoy was landed. I thought perhaps, perhaps he was come, knowing a little of what Oleg Yesukai readies against the Mother of Men. Or if he does not, he must be told! I found what woman would be lent him, and arranged the substitution of myself. Ask me not how! I have wormed secrets which give me power over more than one harem guard—it is not enough to load them with antisex hormone on such a tour of duty! I had the right. Oleg Khan is my enemy and the enemy of my dead father, all means of revenge are lawful to me. But more, worse, Holy Terra lies in danger. Listen, Terra man—"

Flandry awoke. For those few seconds, it had been so fantastic he couldn't react. Like a bad stereodrama, the most ludicrous clichés, he was confronted with a girl (it would be a girl, too, and not simply a disgruntled man!) who babbled her autobiography as prologue to some improbable revelation. Now suddenly he understood that this was real: that melodrama does happen once in a while. And if he got caught playing the hero, any role except comic relief, he was dead.

He drew himself up, fended Bourtai off, and said in haste: "My dear young lady, I have not the slightest competence in these matters. Furthermore, I've heard far more plausible



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stories from far too many colonial girls hoping for a free ride to Terra. Which, I assure you, is actually not a nice place at all for a little colonial girl without funds. I do not wish to offend local pride, but the idea that a single backward planet could offer any threat to the Imperium would be funny if it were not so yawnworthy. I beg you, spare me."

Bourtai stepped back. The cloak fell open. She wore a translucent gown which revealed a figure somewhat stocky for Terran taste but nontheless full and supple. He would have enjoyed watching that, except for the uncomprehending pain on her face.

"But my lord, Orluk," she stammered, "I swear to you by the Mother of us both—"

*You poor romantic,* it cried in him, *what do you think I am, a god? If you're such a yokel you never heard of planting microphones in a guest room, Oleg Khan is not. Shut up before you kill us both!*

Aloud, he got out a delighted guffaw. "Well, by Sirius, I do call this thoughtful. Furnishing me with a beautiful spy atop everything else! But honestly, darling, you can drop the pretense now. Let's play some more adult games, eh, what?"

He reached out for her. She writhed free, ran across the room, dodged his pursuit and almost shouted through swift tears: "No, you fool, you blind brainless cackler, you will listen! You will listen if I must knock you to the floor and tie you up—and tell them, tell when you come home, ask them only to send a real spy and learn for themselves!"

Flandry cornered her. He grabbed both flailing wrists and tried to stop her mouth with a kiss. She brought her forehead hard against his nose. He staggered back, half blind with the pain, and heard her yelling: "It is the Merseians, great green-skinned monsters with long tails, the Merseians, I tell you, who come in secret from a secret landing field. I have seen them myself, walking these halls after dark, I have heard from a girl to whom a drunken orkhon babbled, I have crept like a rat in the walls and listened myself. They are called Merseians, the most terrible enemy your race and mine have yet known, and—"

Flandry sat down on a couch, wiped blood off his mustache, and said weakly: "Never mind that for now. How do we get out of here? Before the guards come to shoot us down, I mean."



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Bourtai fell silent, and he realized he had spoken in Anglic. He realized further that they wouldn't be shot, except to prevent escape. They would be questioned, gruesomely.

He didn't know if there were lenses as well as microphones in the walls. Nor did he know if the bugs passed information on to some watchful human, or only recorded data for study in the morning. He dared assume nothing but the former.

Springing to his feet, he reached Bourtai in one bound. She reacted with feline speed. A hand, edge on, cracked toward his larynx. He had already dropped his head, and took the blow on the hard top of his skull. His own hands gripped the borders of her cloak and crossed forearms at her throat. Before she could jab him in the solar plexus, he yanked her too close to him. She reached up thumbs, to scoop out his eyeballs. He rolled his head and was merely scratched on the nose. After the last buffet, that hurt. He yipped, but didn't let go. A second later, she went limp in his strangle.

He whirled her around, got an arm lock, and let her sag against him. She stirred. So brief an oxygen starvation had brought no more than a moment's unconsciousness. He buried his face in her dark flowing hair, as if he were a lover. It had a warm, somehow summery smell. He found an ear and breathed softly:

"You little gristlehead, did it ever occur to you that the Khan is suspicious of me? That there must be listeners? Now our forlorn chance is to get out of here. Steal a Betelgeusean spaceship, maybe. First, though, I must pretend I am arresting you, so they won't come here with too much haste and alertness for us. Understand? Can you play the part?

She grew rigid. He felt her almost invisible nod. The hard young body leaning on him eased into a smoothness of controlled nerve and muscle. He had seldom known a woman this competent in a physical emergency. Unquestionably, Bourtai Ivanskaya had military training.

She was going to need it.

Aloud, Flandry huffed: "Well, I've certainly never heard anything more ridiculous! There aren't any Merseians around here. I checked very carefully before setting out. Wouldn't want to come across them, don't you know, and spend maybe a year in



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some dreary Merseian jail while the pater negotiated my release. Eh, what? Really now, it's perfect rot, every word." He hemmed and hawed a bit. "I think I'd better turn you in, madam. Come along, now, no tricks!"

He marched her out the door, into a pillared corridor. One end opened on a window, twenty meters above a night-frozen fishpond. The other stretched into dusk, lit by infrequent bracketed lamps. Flandry hustled Bourtai down that side. Presently they came to a downward-sweeping staircase. A pair of sentries, in helmets, leather jackets, guns and knives, stood posted there. One of them aimed and barked: "Halt! What would you?"

"This girl, don't you know," panted Flandry. He nudged Bourtai, who gave some realistic squirmings. "Started to babble all sorts of wild nonsense. Who's in charge here? She thought I'd help her against the Kha Khan. Imagine!"

"What?" A guardsman trod close.

"The Tebtengri will avenge me!" snarled Bourtai. "The Ice People will house in the ruin of this palace!"

Flandry thought she was overacting, but the guards both looked shocked. The nearer one sheathed his blaster. "I shall hold her, Orluk," he said. "Boris, run for the commander."

As he stepped close, Flandry let the girl go. With steel on his pate and stiff leather on his torso, the sentry wasn't very vulnerable. Except— Flandry's right hand rocketed upward. The heel of it struck the guard under the nose. He lurched backward, caromed off the balustrade, and flopped dead on the stairs. The other, half-turned to go, spun about on one booted heel. He snatched for his weapon. Bourtai put a leg behind his ankles and pushed. Down he went. Flandry pounced. They rolled over, clawing for a grip. The guard yelped. Flandry saw Bourtai over his opponent's shoulder. She had taken the belt off the first warrior and circled about with the leather in her hands. Flandry let his enemy get on top. Bourtai put the belt around the man's neck, a knee between his shoulder-blades, and heaved.

Flandry scrambled from below. "Get their blasters," he gasped. "Here, give me one. Quick! We've made more racket than I hoped. Do you know the best way to escape? Lead on, then!"

Bourtai raced barefooted



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down the steps. Her goldcloth cloak and frail gown streamed behind her, insanely unfitting for the occasion. Flandry came behind, one flight, two flights.

Boots clattered on marble. Rounding yet another spiral curve, Flandry met a squad of soldiers quick-stepping upward. The leader hailed him: "Do you have the evil woman, Orluk?"

So there had been a continuous listener. Of course, even surrendering Bourtai, Flandry could not save his own skin. Harmless fop or no, he had heard too much.

The squad's eyes registered the girl's blaster even as their chief spoke. Someone yelled. Bourtai fired into the thick of them. Ionic lightning crashed. Flandry dropped. A bolt sizzled where he had been. He fired, wide-beam, the energy too diluted to kill even at this range but scorching four men at once. As their screams lifted, he bounced back to his feet, overleaped the fallen front line, stiff-armed a warrior beyond, and hit the landing.

From here, a bannister curled grandly to the ground floor. Flandry whooped, seated himself, and slid. At the bottom was a sort of lobby, with glass doors opening on the garden. The moons and rings were so bright that no headlights shone from the half-dozen varyaks roaring toward this entrance. Mounted guardsmen, attracted by the noise of the fight—Flandry stared around. Arched windows flanked the doors, two meters up. He gestured to Bourtai, crouched beneath one and made a stirrup of his hands. She nodded, soared to the sill, broke glass with her gun butt, and fired into the troop. Flandry took shelter behind a column and blasted loose at the remnant of the infantry squad, stumbling down the stairs in pursuit. Their position hopelessly exposed to him, they retreated from sight.

A varyak leaped through the doors. The arms of the soldier aboard it shielded his face against flying glass. Flandry shot before the man had uncovered himself. The varyak, sensitively controlled, veered and went down across the doorway. The next one hurtled over it. The rider balanced himself with a trained body, blazing away at the Terran. Bourtai dropped him from above.

She sprang down unassisted. "I got two more outside," she said. "Another pair are lurking, calling for help—"

"We'll have to chance them. Where are the nearest gates?"



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"They will be closed! We cannot burn through the lock before—"

"I'll find a means. Quick, up on this saddle. Slowly, now, out the door behind me. Right the putt-putts of those two men you killed and stand by." Flandry had already dragged a corpse from one varyak (not without an instant's compassionate wondering what the man had been like alive) and set the machine back on its wheels. He sprang to the seat and went full speed out the shattered door.

So far, energy weapons had fufilled their traditional military function, giving more value to purposeful speed of action than mere numbers. But there was a limit: two people couldn't stave off hundreds for very long. He had to get clear.

Flame sought him. He lacked skill to evade such fire by tricky riding. Instead, he plunged straight down the path, crouched low and hoping he wouldn't be pierced. A bolt burned one leg, slightly but with savage pain. He reached the gloomy, high-arched bridge he wanted. His cycle snorted up and over. Just beyond the hump, he dropped off, relaxing muscles and cushioning himself with an arm in judoka style. Even so, he bumped his nose. For a moment, tears blinded him, and he used bad words. Then the two enemy varyaks followed each other across the bridge. He sprang up on the railing, unseen, and shot both men as they went by.

Vaguely, he heard an uproar elsewhere. One by one, the palace windows lit, until scores of dragon eyes glared into night. Flandry slid down the bridge, disentangled the heaped varyaks, and hailed Bourtai. "Bring the other machines!" She came, riding one and leading two more by tethers to the guide bars. He had felt reasonably sure that would be standard equipment; if these things were commonly used by nomads, there'd be times when a string of pack vehicles was required.

"We take two," he muttered. Here, beneath an overleaning rock, there were a pair of shadows. Moonlight beyond made the garden one fog of coppery light. The outer wall cut that off, brutally black, with merlons raised against Altai's rings like teeth. "The rest, we use to ram down the gates. Can do?"

"Must do!" she said, and set the varyak control panels. "Here. Extra helmets and clothing are always kept in the saddlebags. Put on the helmet,



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at least. The clothes we can don later."

"We won't need them for a short dash—"

"Do you think the spaceport is not now a-crawl with Yesukai men?"

"Oh, hell," said Flandry.

He buckled on the headgear, snapped down the goggles, and mounted anew. Bourtai ran along the varyak line, flipping main switches. The riderless machines took off. Gravel spurted from their wheels, into Flandry's abused face. He followed the girl.

A pair of warriors raced down a cross path, briefly stark under the moons and then eaten again by murk. They had not seen their quarry. The household troops must be in one classic confusion, Flandry thought. He had to escape before hysteria faded and systematic hunting was organized.

The palace gates loomed before him, heavy bars screening off a plaza that was death-white in the moon radiance. Flandry saw his varyaks only as meteoric gleams. Sentries atop the wall had a better view. Blasters thundered, machine guns raved, but there were no riders to drop from those saddles.

The first varyak hit with a doomsday clangor. It rebounded in four pieces. Flandry sensed a chunk of red-hot metal buzz past his ear. The next one crashed, and the bars buckled. The third smote and collapsed across a narrow opening. The fourth flung the gates wide. *"Now!"*

At 200 KPH, Bourtai and Flandry made for the gateway. They had a few seconds without fire from the demoralized men above them. Bourtai hit the toppled machines. Her own climbed that pile, took off, and soared halfway across the plaza. Flandry saw her balance herself, precise as a bird, land on two wheels and vanish in an alley beyond the square. Then it was his turn. He wondered fleetingly what the chances of surviving a broken neck were, and hoped he would not. Not with the Khan's interrogation chambers waiting. Whoops, bang, here we go! He knew he couldn't match Bourtai's performance. He slammed down the third wheel in midair. He hit ground with less violence than expected: first-class shock absorbers on this cycle. An instant he teetered, almost rolling over. He came down on his outrigger. Fire spattered off stone behind him. He retracted the extra wheel and gunned his motor.

A glance north, past the



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Tower toward the spaceport, showed him grav-beam airboats aloft, a hornet swarm. He had no prayer of hijacking a Betelgeusean ship. Nor was it any use to flee to Zalat in the yamen. Where, then, beneath these unmerciful autumnal stars?

Bourtai was a glimpse in moonlight, half a kilometer ahead of him down a narrow nighted street. He let her take the lead, concentrated grimly on avoiding accidents. It seemed like an eyeblink, and it seemed like forever, before they were out of the city and onto the open steppe.

Wind lulled in long grasses, the whispering ran for kilometers, on and on beyond the world's edge, pale yellow-green in a thousand subtle hues rippled by the wind's footsteps. Here and there the spiky red of some frost-nipped bush thrust up; the grasses swirled about it like a sea. High and high overhead, incredibly high, an infinite vault full of wind and deep-blue chill, the sky reached. Krasna burned low in the west, dull orange, painting the steppe with ruddy light and fugitive shadows. The rings were an ice bridge to the south; northward the sky had a bleak greenish shimmer which Bourtai said was reflection off an early snowfall.

Flandry crouched in grasses as tall as himself. When he ventured a peek, he saw the airboat that hunted him. It spiraled lazy, but the mathematics guiding it and its cohorts wove a net around this planet. To his eyes, even through binoculars taken from a saddlebag, the boat was so far as to be a mere metallic flash; but he knew it probed for him with telescopes, ferrous detectors, infrared amplifiers.

He would not have believed he could escape the Khan's hundreds of searching craft this long. Two Altaian days, was it? Memory had faded. He knew only a fever dream of bounding north on furious wheels, his skin dried and bleeding from the air; sleeping a few seconds at a time, in the saddle, eating jerked meat from the varyak supplies as he rode, stopping to refill canteens at a waterhole Bourtai had found by signs invisible to him. He knew only how he ached, to the nucleus of his inmost cell, and how his brain was gritty from weariness.

But the plain was unbelievably huge, almost twice the land area of all Terra. The grass was often as high as this, veiling prey from sky-



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borne eyes. They had driven through several big herds, to break their trail; they had dodged and woven under Bourtai's guidance, and she had a hunter's knowledge of how to confuse pursuit.

Now, though, the chase seemed near its end.

Flandry glanced at the girl. She sat cross-legged, impassive, showing her own exhaustion just by the darkening under her eyes. In stolen leather clothes, hair braided under the crash helmet, she might have been a boy. But the grease smeared on her face for protection had not much affected its haughty good looks. The man hefted his gun. "Think he'll spot us?" he asked. He didn't speak low, but the blowing immensities around reduced all voices to nothing.

"Not yet," she answered. "He is at the extreme detector range, and cannot swoop down at every dubious flicker of instrument readings."

"So . . . ignore him and he'll go away?"

"I fear not." She grew troubled. "They are no fools, the Khan's troopers. I know that search pattern. He and his fellows will circle about, patrolling much the same territory until nightfall. Then, as you know, if we try to ride further, we must turn on the heaters of our varyaks or freeze to death. And that will make us a flame to the infrared spotters."

Flandry rubbed his smooth chin. Altaian garments were ridiculously short on him, so thank all elegant gods for antibeard enzyme! He wished he dared smoke. "What can we do?" he said.

She shrugged. "Stay here. There are well-insulated sleeping bags, which ought to keep us alive if we share a single one. But if the local temperature drops far enough below zero, our own breath and body radiation may betray us."

"How close are we to your friends?"

Bourtai rubbed tired hazel eyes. "I cannot say. They move about, under the Khrebet and along the Kara Gobi fringe. At this time of year they will be drifting southward, so we are not so terribly far from one or another ordu, I suppose. Still, distances are never small on the steppe." After a moment: "If we live the night, we can still not drive to find them. The varyaks' energy cells are exhausted. We shall have to walk."

Flandry glanced at the vehicles, now battered and dusty beyond recognition. Wonder-



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fully durable gadgets, he thought in a vague way. Largely handmade, of course, using small power tools and the care possible in a nonmercantile economy. The radios, though, were short range . . . No use getting wistful. The first call for Tebtengri help would bring that aircraft overhead down like a swooping falcon.

He eased himself to his back and let his muscles throb. The ground was cold under him. After a moment, Bourtai followed suit, snuggling close in somehow childlike trustfulness.

"If we do not escape, well, such is the space-time pattern," she said, more calmly than he could have managed. "But if we do, what then is your plan, Orluk?"

"Get word to Terra, I suppose. Don't ask me how."

"Will not your friends come avenging when you fail to return?"

"No. The Khan need only tell the Betelgeuseans that I, regrettably died in some accident or riot or whatever, and will be cremated with full honors. It would not be difficult to fake: a blaster-charred corpse about my size, perhaps, for one human looks much like another to the untrained nonhuman. Word will reach my organization, and naturally some will suspect, but they have so much else to do that the suspicion will not appear strong enough to act on. The most they will do is send another agent like myself. And this time, expecting him, the Khan can fool him: camouflage the new installations, make sure our man talks only to the right people and sees only the right things. What can one man do against a planet?"

"You have done somewhat already."

"But I told you, I caught Oleg by surprise."

"You will do more," she continued serenely. "Can you not, for instance, smuggle a letter out through some Betelgeusean? We can get agents into Ulan Baligh."

"I imagine the same thought has occurred to the Khan. He will make sure no one he is not certain of has any contact with any Betelegeusean, and will search all export material with care."

"Write a letter in the Terran language."

"He can read that himself, if no one else."

"Oh, no." Bourtai raised herself on one elbow. "There is not a human on all Altai except yourself who reads the



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—what do you call it? —the Anglic. Some Betelgeuseans do, of course, but no Altaian has ever learned; there seemed no pressing reason. Oleg himself reads only Altaian and the principal Betelgeusean language. I know; he mentioned it to me one night recently." She spoke quite coolly of her past year. Flandry gathered that in this culture it was no disgrace to have been a harem slave: fortunes of war.

"Even worse," he said. "I can just see Oleg's agents permitting a document in an unknown alphabet to get out. In fact, from now until whenever they have me dead, I doubt if they will let anything they are not absolutely sure about come near a spaceship, or a spacefarer."

Bourtai sat up straight. Sudden, startling tears blurred her gaze. "But you cannot be helpless!" she cried. "You are from *Terra!*"

He didn't want to disillusion her. "We'll see." Hastily, plucking a stalk of grass and chewing it: "This tastes almost like home. Remarkable similarity."

"Oh, but it is of Terran origin." Bourtai's dismay changed mercurially to simple astonishment, that he should not know what was so everyday to her. "The first colonists here found the steppe a virtual desert—only sparse plant forms, poisonous to man. All other native life had retreated into the Arctic and Antarctic. Our ancestors mutated what seeds and small animals they had along, created suitable strains, and released them. Terrestroid ecology soon took over the whole unfrozen belt."

Flandry noticed once more that Bourtai's nomadic life had not made her a simple barbarian. Hm, it would be most interesting to see what a true civilization on wheels was like . . . if he survived, which was dubious . . . He was too tired to concentrate. His thoughts drifted off along a pattern of fact and deduction, mostly things he knew already.

Krasna was obviously an old sun, middle Population Two, drifted from the galactic nucleus into this spiral arm. As such, it—and its planets—were poor in the heavier elements, which are formed within the stars, scattered by novae and supernovae, and accumulated in the next stellar generation. Being smaller than Sol, Krasna had matured slowly, a red dwarf through most of its long existence.

Initially, for the first billion years or so, internal heat had made Altai more or less Ter-



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restroid in temperature. Protoplasmic life had evolved in shallow seas, and probably the first crude land forms. But when moltenness and most radioactivity were used up, only the dull sun furnished heat. Altai froze. It happened slowly enough for life to adapt during the long period of change.

And then, while who knew how many megacenturies passed, Altai was ice-bound from pole to pole. An old, old world, so old that one moon had finally spiraled close and shattered to make the rings: so old, indeed, that its sun had completed the first stage of hydrogen burning and moved into the next. From now on, for the next several million years, Krasna would get hotter and brighter. At last Altai's seas, liquid again, would boil; beyond that, the planet itself would boil, as Krasna became nova; and beyond that the star would be a white dwarf, sinking toward ultimate darkness.

But as yet the process was only begun. Only the tropics had reached a temperature men could endure. Most of the water fled thence and snowed down on the still frigid polar quarters, leaving dry plains where a few plants struggled to re-adapt . . . and were destroyed by this invading green grass . . .

Flandry's mind touched the remote future of his own planet, and recoiled. A gelid breeze slid around him. He grew aware how stiff and chilly he was. And the sun not even set!

He groaned back to a sitting position. Bourtai sat calm in her fatalism. Flandry envied her. But it was not in him, to accept the chance of freezing —to walk, if he survived this night, over hundreds of parched kilometers, through cold strengthening hour by autumn hour.

His mind scuttered about, a trapped weasel seeking any bolthole. Fire, fire, my chance of immortality for a fire— *Hoy, there!*

He sprang to his feet, remembered the aircraft, and hit dirt again so fast that he bumped his bruised nose. The girl listened wide-eyed to his streaming, sputtering Anglic. When he had finished, she sketched a reverent sign. "I too pray the Spirit of the Mother that She guide us," said Bourtai.

Flandry skinned his teeth in a grin. "I, uh, wasn't precisely praying, my dear. No, I think I've a plan. Wild, but— now, listen—"

Arghun Tiliksky thrust his



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face out of that shadow which blurred the ring of cross-legged men, into the scant sunlight trickling through a small window of the Kibitka. "It was evil," he declared sharply. "Nothing is more dreaded than a grass fire. And you set one! No luck can come from such a deed."

Flandry studied him. The noyon of the Mangu Tuman was quite young, even for these times when few men of Tebtengri reached great age; and a dashing, gallant warrior, as everyone said and as he had proved in the rescue. But to some extent, Arghun was the local equivalent of a prude.

"The fire was soon put out, wasn't it?" asked the Terran mildly. "I heard from your scout, the Kha Khan's aircraft swarmed there and tossed foam bombs down till the flames were smothered. Not many hectares were burned over."

"In such tasks," said Toghrul Vavilov, Gur-Khan of the tribe, "all Altaians are one." He stroked his beard and traded bland smiles with Flandry: a kindred hypocrite. "Our scout needed but to carry a few foam bombs himself, and no enemy vessel would molest him. He observed them and returned here in peace."

One of the visiting chieftains exclaimed: "Your noyon verges on blasphemy himself, Toghrul. Sir Dominic is from Terra! If a lord of Terra wishes to set a blaze, who dares deny him?"

Flandry felt he ought to blush, but decided not to. "Be that as it may," he said, "I couldn't think of any better plan. Not all the tribal leaders come to this—what do you call the meeting?—this kurultai, have heard just what happened. The girl Bourtai and myself were trapped with little power left in our varyaks, and the probability of freezing or starving in a few more days if we were not detected by infra-red that same night. So, soon after dark I scurried about on foot, setting fires which quickly coalesced into one. The wind swept the flames from us—but the radiation of our varyak heaters was still undetectable against such a background! Since we could not be extremely far as nega-grav flight goes from some ordu of the Shamanate, it seemed likely that at least one aerial scout would come near to investigate the fire. Therefore, after a while, we broke radio silence to call for help. Then we ducked and dodged,



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hunted by the gathering vessels of Oleg, somewhat screened by the heat and smoke . . . until a flying war party from the Mangu Tuman arrived, beat off the foe, and escaped with us before more of the enemy should arrive."

"And so this council has been called," added Toghrul Vavilov. "The chiefs of all our alied tribes must understand what we now face."

"But the fire—" mumbled Arghun.

Eyes went through gloom to an old man seated under the window. Furs covered frail Juchi Ilyak so thickly that his bald parchment-skinned head looked disembodied. The Shaman stroked a wisp of white beard, blinked eyes that were still sharp, and murmured with a dry little smile: "This is not the time to dispute whether the rights of a man from Holy Terra override the Yassa by which Altai lives. The question seems rather, how shall we all survive in order to raise such legal quibbles at another date?"

Arghun tossed his reddish-black hair and snorted: "Oleg's father, and the whole Nuru Bator dynasty before him, tried to beat down the Tebtengri. But still we hold the northlands. I do not think this will change overnight."

"Oh, but it will," said Flandry in his softest voice. "Unless something is done, it will."

He treated himself to one of the few remaining cigarets and leaned forward so the light would pick out his features, exotic in this planet. He said: "Throughout your history, you have waged war, as you have driven your machines, with chemical power and stored solar energy. A few small, stationery nuclear generators at Ulan Baligh and the mines are all that your way of life demanded. Your economy would not have supported atomic war, even if feuds and boundary disputes were worth it. So you Tebtengri have remained strong enough to hold these subarctic pastures, though all other tribes were to ally against you. Am I right?"

They nodded. He continued: "But now Oleg Khan is getting help from outside. Some of his new toys I have seen with my own eyes. Craft which can fly flourishes around yours, or go beyond the atmosphere to swoop down again; battlecars whose armor your strongest chemical explosives cannot pierce; missiles to devastate so wide an area that no dispersal can save you. As yet, he has



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not much modern equipment. But more will arrive during the next several months, until he has enough to crush you. And, still worse, he will have allies that are not human."

They stirred uneasily, some of them making signs against witchcraft. Only Juchi the Shaman remained quiet, watching Flandry with impassive eyes. A clay pipe in his hand sent bitter incense toward the roof. "Who are these creatures?" he asked calmly.

"Merseians," said Flandry. "Another imperial race than man—and man stands in the path of their amibitions. For long now we have been locked with them, nominally at peace, actualy probing for weaknesses, subverting, assassinating, skirmishing. They have decided Altai would make a useful naval base. Outright invasion would be expensive, especially if Terra noticed and interfered: and we probably would notice, since we watch them so closely. But if the Merseians supply Oleg with just enough help so that he can conquer the whole planet for them—do you see? Once he has done that, the Merseian engineers will arrive; Altaians will dig and die to build fortresses; this entire world will be one impregnable net of strongholds . . . and then Terra is welcome to learn what has been going on!"

"Does Oleg himself know this?" snapped Toghrul.

Flandry shrugged. "Insufficiently well, I imagine. Like many another puppet ruler, he will live to see the strings his masters have tied on him. But that will be too late. I've watched this sort of thing happen elsewhere."

*"In fact,"* he added, *"I've helped bring it about, now and then—on Terra's behalf!"*

Toghrul entwined nervous fingers. "I believe you," he said. "We have all had glimpses, heard rumors . . . What is to be done? Can we summon the Terrans?"

"Aye—aye—call the Terrans, warn the Mother of Men—" Flandry felt how passion flared up in the scarred warriors around him. He had gathered that the Tebtengri had no use for Subotai the Prophet, but built their own religion around a hard-boiled sort of humanistic pantheism. It grew on him how strong a symbol the ancestral planet was to them.

He didn't want to tell them what Terra was actually like these days. (Or perhaps had always been. He suspected men are only saints and heroes in retrospect.) Indeed, he



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dare not speak of sottish Emperors, venal nobles, faithless wives, servile commons, to this armed and burning reverence. *But luckily, there's a practical problem at hand.*

"Terra is farther from here than Merseia," he said. "Even our nearest base is more distant than theirs. I don't believe any Merseians are on Altai at this moment, but surely Oleg has at least one swift spaceship at his disposal, to inform his masters if anything should go wrong. Let us get word to Terra, and let Oleg learn this has happened, what do you think he'll do?" Flandry nodded, owlish. "Right, on the first guess! Oleg will send to that nearest Merseian base, where I know a heavy naval force is currently stationed. I doubt very much if the Merseians will write off their investment tamely. No, they will dispatch their ships at once, occupy various points, blast the Tebtengri lands with nuclear bombs, and dig in. It will not be as smooth and thorough a job as they now plan, but it will be effective. By the time a Terran fleet of reasonable size can get here, the Merseians will be fairly well entrenched. The most difficult task in space warfare is to get a strong enemy off a planet firmly held. It may prove impossible. But even if, thanks to our precipitating matters, the Terrans do blast the Merseians loose, Altai will have been made into a radioactive desert.

Silence clapped down. Men stared at each other, and back to Flandry, with a horror he had seen before and which was one of the few things it still hurt him to watch. He went on quickly:

"So the one decent objective for us is to get a secret message out. If Oleg and the Merseians don't suspect Terra knows, they won't hasten their program. It can be Terra, instead, which suddenly arrives in strength, seizes Ulan Baligh, establishes ground emplacements and orbital forts. I know Merseian strategy well enough to predict that under those circumstances, they won't fight. It isn't worth it, since Altai cannot be used as an aggressive base against them." He should have said *will not;* but let these people make the heartbreaking discovery for themselves, that Terra's only real interest was to preserve a fat status quo.

Arghun sprang to his feet. As he crouched under the low ceiling, primness dropped from him. His young leonine face became a sun, he cried:



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"And Terra will have us! We will be restored to humankind!"

While the Tebtengri whooped and wept at that understanding, Flandry smoked his cigaret with care. After all, he thought, it needn't corrupt them. Not too much. There would be a small naval base, an Imperial governor, an enforced peace between all tribes. Otherwise they could live as they chose. It wasn't worth Terra's while to proselytize. What freedom the Altaians lost here at home, their young men would regain simply by having access to the stars. Wasn't that so? Wasn't it?

Juchi the Shaman, who bound together all these chiefs, spoke in a whisper that pierced: "Let us have silence. We must weigh how this may be done."

Flandry waited till the men had seated themselves. Then he gave them a rueful smile. "That's a good question," he said. "Next question, please."

"The Betelgeuseans—" rumbled Toghrul.

"I doubt that," said another gur-khan. "If I were Oleg the Damned, I would put a guard around every individual Betelgeusean, as well as every spaceship, until all danger has passed. I would inspect every trade article, every fur or hide or smokegem, before it was loaded."

"Or send to Merseia at once," shivered someone else.

"No," said Flandry. "Not that. We can be sure Merseia is not going to take such hazardous action without being fairly sure that Terra has heard of their project. They have too many commitments elsewhere."

"Besides," said Juchi, "Oleg Yesukai will not make himself a laughing stock before them —screaming for help because one fugitive is loose in the Khrebet."

"Anyhow," put in Toghrul, "he knows how impossible it is to smuggle such an appeal out. Those tribes not of the Shamanate may dislike the Yesukai tyranny, but they are still more suspicious of us, who traffic with the Ice Dwellers and scoff at that stupid Prophet. Even supposing one of them *would* agree to brand a hide for us, or slip a letter into a bale of pelts, and even suposing that did get past Oleg's inspectors, the cargo might wait months to be loaded, months more in some Betelgeusean warehouse."

"And we don't have so many months, I suppose, before Oleg overruns you and the Merse-



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ians arrive as planned," finished Flandry.

He sat for a while listening to their desperate chewing of impractical schemes. It was hot and stuffy in here. All at once he could take no more. He rose. "I need fresh air, and a chance to think," he said.

Juchi nodded grave dismissal. Arghun jumped up again. "I come too," he said.

"If the Terran desires your company," said Toghrul.

"Indeed, indeed." Flandry's agreement was absent-minded.

He went out the door and down a short ladder. The kibitka where the chiefs met was a large, covered truck, its box fitted out as austere living quarters. On top of it, as on all the bigger, slower vehicles, the flat black plates of a solar-energy collector were tilted to face Krasna and charge an accumulator bank. Such roofs made this wandering town, dispersed across the hills, seem like a flock of futuristic turtles.

The Khrebet was not a high range. Gullied slopes ran up, gray-green with thornbush and yellow with sere grass, to a glacial cap in the north. Downward swept a cold wind, whining about Flandry; he shivered and drew the coat hastily sewn to his measure tighter about him. The sky was pale today, the rings low and wan in the south, where the hills emptied into steppe.

As far as Flandry could see, the herds of the Mangu Tuman spread out under care of varyak-mounted boys. They were not cattle. Terras' higher mammals were hard to raise on other planets; rodents are tougher and more adaptable. The first colonists had brought rabbits along, which they mutated and cross-bred systematically. That ancestor could hardly be recognized in the cow-sized grazing beasts of today, more like giant dun guineau pigs than anything else. There were also separate flocks of bio-engineered ostriches.

Arghun gestured with pride. "Yonder is the library," he said, "and those children seated nearby are being instructed."

Flandry looked at that kibitka. Of course, given microprint, you could carry thousands of volumes along on your travels; illiterates could never have operated these ground vehicles or the negagrav aircraft watchful overhead. Certain other trucks—including some trains of them—must house arsenals, sickbay, machine tools, small fac-



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tories for textiles and ceramics. Poorer families might live crowded in a single yurt, a round felt tent on a motor cart; but no one looked hungry or ragged. And it was not an impoverished nation which carried such gleaming missiles on flatbed cars, or operated such a flock of light tanks, or armed every adult. Considering Bourtai, Flandry decided that the entire tribe, male and female, must be a military as well as a social and economic unit. Everybody worked, and everybody fought, and in their system the proceeds were more evenly shared than on Terra.

"Where does your metal come from?" he inquired.

"The grazing lands of every tribe include some mines," said Arghun. "We plan our yearly round so as to spend time there, digging and smelting—just as elsewhere we reap grain planted on the last visit, or tap crude oil from our wells and refine it. What we cannot produce ourselves, we trade with others to get."

"It sounds like a virtuous life," said Flandry.

His slight shudder did not escape Arghun, who hastened to say: "Oh, we have our pleasures too, feasts, games and sports, the arts, the great fair at Kievka Hill each third year—." He broke off.

Bourtai came walking past a campfire. Flandry could sense her loneliness. Women in this culture were not much inferior to men; she was free to go where she would, and was a heroine for having brought the Terran here. But her family were slain and she was not even given work to do.

She saw the men and ran toward them. "Oh . . . what has been decided?"

"Nothing yet." Flandry caught her hands. By all hot stars, she was a good-looking wench! His face crinkled its best smile. "I couldn't see going in circles with a lot of men, hairy however well-intentioned, when I might be going in circles with you. So I came out here. And my hopes were granted."

A flush crept up her high flat cheeks. She wasn't used to glibness. Her gaze fluttered downward. "I do not know what to say," she whispered.

"You need say nothing. Only be," he leered.

"No—I am no one. The daughter of a dead man . . . my dowry long ago plundered . . . And you are a Terran! It is not right!"

"Do you think your dowry matters?" said Arghun. His voice cracked over.



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Flandry threw him a surprised glance. At once the warrior's mask was restored. But for an instant, Flandry had seen why Arghun Tiliksky didn't like him.

He sighed. "Come, we had better return to the kurultai," he said.

He didn't release Bourtai, but tucked her arm under his. She followed mutely along. He could feel her tremble a little, through the heavy garments. The wind off the glacier ruffled a stray lock of dark hair.

As they neared the kibitka of the council, its door opened. Juchi Ilyak stood there, bent beneath his years. The wizened lips opened, and somehow the breath carried across meters of blustering air: "Terran, perhaps there is a way for us. Dare you come with me to the Ice Folk?"

Tengri Nor, the Ghost Lake, lay so far north that Altai's rings were only a pale glimmer, half seen by night on the southern horizon. When Flandry and Juchi stepped from their airboat, it was still day. Krasna was an ember, tinging the snowfields red. But it toppled swiftly, purple shadows glided from drift to drift so fast a man could see them.

Flandry had not often met such quietness. Even in space, there was always the low noise of the machinery that kept you alive. Here, the air seemed to freeze all sound; the tiniest wind blew up fine ice crystals, whirling and glistening above diamond-like snowbanks, and it rippled the waters of Tengri Nor, but he could not hear it. He had no immediate sense of cold on his fur-muffled body, even on his thickly greased face—not in this dry atmosphere—but breathing was a sharpness in his nostrils. He thought he could smell the lake, a chemical pungency, but he wasn't sure. None of his Terran senses were quite to be trusted in this winter place.

He said, and the unexpected loudness was like a gunshot, shocking, so that his question ended in a whisper: "Do they know we are here?"

"Oh, yes. They have their ways. They will meet us soon." Juchi looked northward, past the lakeshore to the mountainous ruins. Snow had drifted halfway up those marble walls, white on white, with the final sunlight bleeding across shattered colonnades. Frost from the Shaman's breath began to stiffen his beard.

"I suppose they recognize the markings—know this is a friendly craft—but what if the Kha Khan sent a disguised vessel?"



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"That was tried once or twice, years ago. The boats were destroyed by some means, far south of here. The Dwellers have their awarenesses." Juchi raised his arms and started swaying on his feet. A high-pitched chant came from his lips, he threw back his head and closed his eyes.

Flandry had no idea whether the Shaman was indulging superstition, practicing formal ritual, or doing what was actually necessary to summon the glacier folk. He had been in too many strange places to dogmatize. He waited, his eyes ranging the scene.

Beyond the ruins, westward along the northern lakeshore, a forest grew. White slender trees with intricate, oddly geometric branches flashed like icicles, like jewels. Their thin bluish leaves vibrated, it seemed they should tinkle, that all this forest was glass, but Flandry had never been near a wilderness so quiet. Low gray plants carpeted the snow between the gleaming boles. Where a rock thrust up here and there, it was almost buried under such lichenoid growth. In some place less cold and hushed, Flandry would have thought of tropical richness.

The lake itself reached out of sight, pale blue between snowbanks. As evening swept across the waters, Flandry could see against shadow that mists hovered above.

Juchi had told him, quite matter-of-factly, that the protoplasmic life native to Altai had adapted to low temperatures in past ages by synthesizing methanol. A fifty-fifty mixture of this and water remained fluid below minus forty degrees. When it finally must freeze, it did not expand into cell-disrupting ice crystals, but became gradually more slushy. Lower life forms remained functional till about seventy below, Centigrade; after that they went dormant. The higher animals, being homeothermic, need not suspend animation till the air reached minus a hundred degrees.

Biological accumulation of alcohol kept the polar lakes and rivers fluid till midwinter. The chief problem of all species was to find minerals, in a world largely glaciated. Bacteria brought up some from below; animals traveled far to lick exposed rock, returned to their forests and contributed heavy atoms when they died. But in general, the Altaian ecology made do without. It had never evolved bones, for instance, but had elaborated



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chitinous and cartilaginous materials beyond anything seen on Terra.

The account had sounded plausible and interesting, in a warm kibitka on a grassy slope, with microtexts at hand to give details. When he stood on million-year-old snow, and watching night creep up like smoke through crystal trees and cyclopean ruins, hearing Juchi chant under a huge green sunset sky, Flandry discovered that scientific explanations were but little of the truth.

One of the moons was up. Flandry saw something drift across its copper shield. The objects neared, a flock of white spheres, ranging in diameter from a few centimeters to a giant bigger than the airboat. Tentacles streamed downward from them. Juchi broke off. "Ah," he said. "Aeromedusae. The Dwellers cannot be far."

"What?" Flandry hugged himself. The cold was beginning to be felt now, as it gnawed through fur and leather toward flesh.

"Our name for them. They look primitive, but are actually well evolved, with sense organs and brains. They electrolyze hydrogen metabolically, to inflate themselves, breathe backward for propulsion, fed on small game which they shock insensible. The Ice Folk have domesticated them."

Flandry stole a glance at a jagged wall, rearing above gloom to catch a sunbeam and flush rose. "They did more than that, once," he said with pity.

Juchi nodded, oddly little impressed. "I daresay intelligence grew up on Altai in response to worsening conditions —the warming sun." His tone was detached. "It built a high civilization, but the shortage of metals was a handicap, and the steady shrinking of the snow area may have led to a cultural collapse. Yet that is not what the Dwellers themselves claim. They have no sense of loss about their past." He squinted slant eyes in a frown, seeking words. "As nearly as I can understand them, which is not much, they . . . abandoned something unsuitable . . . they found better methods."

Two beings came from the forest.

At first glance they were like dwarfish white-furred men. Then you saw details of squat build and rubbery limbs. The feet were long and webbed, expandable to broad snowshoes or foldable to short skis. The hands had three fingers opposing a thumb set in the



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middle of the wrist. The ears were feathery tufts; fine tendrils waved above each round black eye; sad gray monkey faces peered from a ruff of hair. Their breath did not steam like the humans': their body temperature was well below the Centigrade zero. One of them bore a stone lamp in which an alcohol flame wavered. The other had an intricately carved white staff; in an undefinable way, the circling medusa flock seemed to be guided by it.

They came near, halted, and waited. Nothing moved but the low wind, ruffling their fur and streaming the flame. Juchi stood as quiet. Flandry made himself conform, though his teeth wanted to clap in his jaws. He had seen many kinds of life, on worlds more foreign than this. But there was a strangeness here which got under his skin and crawled.

The sun went down. Thin dustless air gave no twilight. Stars blazed forth, pyrotechnic in a sudden blackness. The edge of the rings painted a remote arc. The moon threw cuprous radiance over the snow, shadows into the forest.

A meteor split the sky with noiseles lightning. Juchi seemed to take that as a signal. He began talking. His voice was like ice, toning as it contracted in midnight cold: not altogether a human voice. Flandry began to understand what a Shaman was, and why he presided over the northland tribes. Few men were able to master the Dwellers' language and deal with them. Yet trade and alliance—metal given for organic fuel and curious plastic substances; mutual defense against the Kha Khan's sky raiders—was a large part of the Tebtengri strength.

One of the beings made answer. Juchi turned to Flandry. "I have said who you are and whence you come. They are not surprised. Before I spoke your need, he said their —I do not know just what the word means, but it has something to do with communication—he said they could reach Terra itself, as far as mere distance was concerned, but only through . . . dreams?"

Flandry stiffened. It could be. It could be. How long had men been hunting for some faster-than-light equivalent of radio? A handful of centuries. What was that, compared to the age of the universe? Or even the age of Altai? He realized, not simply intellectually but with his whole organism, how old this planet was. In all that time—

"Telepathy?" he blurted.



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"I've never heard of telepathy with so great a range!"

"No. Not that, or they would have warned us of this Merseian situation before now. It is nothing that I quite understand." Juchi spoke with care: "He said to me, all the powers they possess look useless in this situation."

Flandry sighed. "I might have known it. That would have been too easy. No chance for heriocs."

"They have found means to live, less cumbersome than all those buildings and engines were," said Juchi. "They have been free to think for I know not how many ages. But they have therefore grown weak in sheerly material ways. They help us withstand the aggressions from Ulan Baligh; they can do nothing against the might of Merseia."

Half seen in red moonlight, one of the autochthones spoke.

Juchi: "They do not fear racial death. They know all things must end, and yet nothing ever really ends. However, it would be desirable that their lesser brethren in the ice forests have a few more million years to live, so that they may also evolve toward truth."

*Which is a fine, resounding ploy,* thought Flandry, *provided it be not the simple fact.*

Juchi: "They, like us, are willing to become clients of the Terrestrial Empire. To them, it means nothing; they will never have enough in common with men to be troubled by any human governors. They know Terra will not gratuitously harm them—whereas Merseia would, if only by provoking that planet-wide battle of space fleets you describe. Therefore, the Cold People will assist us in any way they can, though they know of none at present."

"Do these two speak for their whole race?" asked Flandry dubiously.

"And for the forests and the lakes," said Juchi.

Flandry thought of a life which was all of one great organism, and nodded. "If you say so, I'll accept it. But if they can't help—"

Juchi gave an old man's sigh, like wind over the acrid waters. "I had hoped they could. But now— Have you no plan of your own?"

Flandry stood a long time, feeling the chill creep inward. At last he said: "If the only spaceships are at Ulan Baligh, then it seems we must get into the city somehow, to deliver our message. Have these folk any means of secretly contacting a Betelgeusean?"

Juchi inquired. "No," he



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translated the answer. "Not if the traders are closely guarded, and their awareness tells them that is so."

One of the natives stooped forward a little, above the dull blue fire, so that his face was illuminated. Could as human an emotion as sorrow really be read into those eyes? Words droned. Juchi listened.

"They can get us into the city, undetected, if it be a cold enough night," he said. "The medusae can carry us through the air, actually seeing radar beams and eluding them. And, of course, a medusa is invisible to metal detectors as well as infra-red scopes." The Shaman paused. "But what use is that, Terra man? We ourselves can walk disguised into Ulan Baligh."

"But could we fly—?" Flandry's voice trailed off.

"Not without being stopped by traffic control officers and investigated."

"S-s-so." Flandry raised his face to the glittering sky. He took the moonlight full in his eyes and was briefly dazzled. Tension tingled along his nerves.

"We've debated trying to radio a Betelgeusean ship as it takes off, before it goes into secondary drive." He spoke aloud, slowly, to get the hammering within himself under control. "But you said the Tebtengri have no set powerful enough to broadcast that far, thousands of kilometers. And, of course, we couldn't beamcast, since we couldn't pinpoint the ship at any instant."

"True. In any event, the Khan's aerial patrols would detect our transmission and pounce."

"Suppose a ship, a friendly spaceship, came near this planet without actually landing . . . could the Ice Dwellers communicate with it?"

Juchi asked, Flandry did not need the translated answer: "No. They have no radio sets at all. Even if they did, their 'casting would be as liable to detection as ours. And did you not say yourself, Orluk, all our messages must be kept secret, right to the moment that the Terran fleet arrives in strength? That Oleg Khan must not even suspect a message has been sent?"

"Well, no harm in asking." Flandry's gaze continued to search upward, till he found Betelgeuse like a torch among the constellations. "Could we *know* there was such a ship in the neighborhood?"

"I daresay it would radio as it approached . . . notify Ulan Baligh spaceport—" Juchi conferred with the non-



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humans. "Yes. We could have men, borne by medusae, stationed unnoticeably far above the city. They could carry receivers. There would be enough beam leakage for them to listen to any conversation between the spaceship and the portmaster. Would that serve?"

Flandry breathed out in a great freezing gust. "It might."

Suddenly, and joyously, he laughed. Perhaps no such sound had ever rung across Tengri Nor. The Dwellers started back, like frightened small animals. Juchi stood in shadow. For that instant, only Captain Dominic Flandry of Imperial Terra had light upon him. He stood with his head raised into the copper moonlight, and laughed like a boy.

"By Heaven," he shouted, "we're going to do it!"

An autumn gale came down off the pole. It gathered snow on its way across the steppe, and struck Ulan Baligh near midnight. In minutes, the steep red roofs were lost to sight. Close by a lighted window, a man saw horizontal white streaks, whirling out of darkness and back into darkness. If he went a few meters away, pushing through drifts already knee-high, the light was gone. He stood blind, buffeted by the storm, and heard it rave.

Flandry descended from the upper atmosphere. Its cold had smitten so deep he thought he might never be warm again. In spite of an oxygen tank, his lungs were starving. He saw the blizzard from above as a moon-dappled black blot, the early ice floes on Ozero Rurik dashed to and fro along its southern fringe. A cabling of tentacles meshed him, he sat under a giant balloon rushing downward through the sky. Behind him trailed a flock of other medusae, twisting along air currents he could not feel to avoid radar beams he could not see. Ahead of him was only one, bearing a Dweller huddled against a cake of ice; for what lay below was hell's own sulfurous wind to the native.

Even Flandry felt how much warmer it was, when the snowstorm enclosed him. He crouched forward, squinting into a nothingness that yelled. Once his numbed feet, dangling down, struck a rooftree. The blow came as if from far away, palely at first, strengthening as he neared, the Prophet's Tower thrust its luminous shaft up and out of sight.

Flandry groped for the nozzle at his shoulder. His desti-



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nation gave just enough light for him to see through the driven flakes. Another medusa crowded close, bearing a pressure tank of paint. Somehow, Flandry reached across the air between and made the hose fast.

*Now, Arctic intelligence, do you understand what I want to do? Can you guide this horse of mine for me?*

The wind yammered in his ears. He heard other noises like blasting, the powerful breaths by which his medusa moved itself. Almost, he was battered against the tablet wall. His carrier wobbled in midair, fighting to maintain position. An inlaid letter, big as a house, loomed before him, black against shining white. He aimed his hose and squirted.

Damn! The green jet was flung aside in a flaw of wind. He corrected his aim and saw the paint strike. It remained liquid even at this temperature . . . no matter, it was sticky enough . . . The first tank was quickly used up. Flandry coupled to another. Blue this time. All the Tebtengri had contributed all the squirtable paint they had, every hue in God's rainbow. Flandry could but hope there would be enough.

There was, though he came near fainting from chill and exhaustion before the end of the job. He could not remember ever having so brutal a task. Even so, when the last huge stroke was done, he could not resist adding an exclamation point at the very bottom —three centimeters high.

"Let's go," he whispered. Somehow, the mute Dweller understood and pointed his staff. The medusa flock sprang through the clouds.

Flandry had a moment's glimpse of a military airboat. It had detached itself from the flock hovering above the spaceport, perhaps going off duty. As the medusae broke from the storm, into clear moonlight and ringlight, the craft veered. Flandry saw its guns stab energy bolts into the flock, and reached for his own futile blaster. His fingers were wooden, they didn't close . . .

The medusae, all but his and the Dweller's whipped about. They surrounded the patrol boat, laid tentacles fast and clung. It was nearly buried under them. Electric fires crawled, sparks dripped, these creatures could break hydrogen from water. Flandry recalled in a dull part of his mind that a metallic fuselage was a Faraday cage, immune to lightning. But when con-



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centrated electric discharges burned holes, spotwelded control circuits—the boat staggered in midair. The medusae detached themselves. The boat plummeted.

Flandry relaxed and let his creature bear him northward.

The town seethed. There had been rioting in the Street of Gunsmiths, and blood still dappled the new-fallen snow. Armed men tramped around palace and spaceport; mobs hooted beyond them. From the lakeshore encampments came war music, pipes squealed, gongs crashed, the young men rode their varyaks in breakneck circles and cursed.

Oleg Khan looked out the palace window. "It shall be made good to you," he muttered. "Oh, yes, my people, you shall have satisfaction."

Turning to the Betelgeusean, who had just been fetched, he glared into the blue face. "You have seen?"

"Yes, your majesty." Zalat's Altaian, usually fluent and little accented, grew thick. He was a badly shaken being. Only the quick arrival of the royal guards had saved his ship from destruction by a thousand shrieking fanatics. "I swear, I, my crew, we had nothing to do with . . . we are innocent as —"

"Of course! Of course!" Oleg Yesukai brought one palm down in an angry slicing motion. "I am not one of those ignorant rodent herders. Every Betelgeusean has been under supervision, every moment since —" He checked himself.

"I have still not understood why," faltered Zalat.

"Was my reason not made clear to you? You know the Terran visitor was killed by Tebtengri operatives, the very day he arrived. It bears out what I have long suspected, these tribes have become religiously xenophobic. Since they doubtless have other agents in the city, who will try to murder your people in turn, it is best all of you be closely guarded, have contact only with men we know are loyal, until I have full control of the situation."

His own words calmed Oleg somewhat. He sat down, stroked his beard and watched Zalat from narrowed eyes. "Your difficulties this morning are regrettable," he continued smoothly. "Because you are outworlders, and the defiling symbols are not in the Altaian alphabet, many people leaped to the conclusion that it was some dirty word in your language. I, of course, know bet-



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ter. I also know from the exact manner in which a patrol craft was lost last night, how this outrage was done: unquestionably by Tebtengri, with the help of the Arctic devil-folk. Such a vile deed would not trouble them in the least; they are not followers of the Prophet. But what puzzles me—I admit this frankly, though confidentially—*why?* A daring, gruelling task . . . merely for a wanton insult?"

He glanced back toward the window. From this angle, the crimson Tower looked itself. You had to be on the north to see what had been done: the tablet wall disfigured by more than a kilometer of splashed paint. But from that side, the fantastic desecration was visible across entire horizons.

The Kha Khan doubled a fist. "It shall be repaid them," he said. "This has rallied the orthodox tribes behind me as no other thing imaginable. When their children are boiled before their eyes, the Tebtengri will realize what they have done."

Zalat hesitated. "Your majesty—"

"Yes?" Oleg snarled, as he must at something.

"Those symbols are letters of the Terran alphabet."

*"What?"*

"I know the Anglic language somewhat," said Zalat. "Many Betelgeuseans do. But how could those Tebtengri ever have learned—"

Oleg, who knew the answer to that, interrupted by seizing the captain's tunic and shaking him. "What does it say?" he cried.

"That's the strangest part, your majesty," stammered Zalat. "It doesn't mean anything. Not that makes sense."

"Well, what sound does it spell, then? Speak before I have your teeth pulled!"

"Mayday," choked Zalat. "Just Mayday, your majesty."

Oleg let him go. For a while there was silence. At last the Khan said: "Is that a Terran word?"

"Well . . . it could be. I mean, well, May is the name of a month in the Terran calendar, and Day means 'diurnal period.' " Zalat rubbed his yellow eyes, searching for logic. "I suppose Mayday could mean the first day of May."

Oleg nodded slowly. "That sounds reasonable. The Altaian calendar, which is modified from the ancient Terran, has a similar name for a month of what is locally springtime. Mayday—spring festival day? Perhaps."

He returned to the window and brooded across the city.



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"It's long until May," he said. "If that was an incitement to . . . anything . . . it's foredoomed. We are going to break the Tebtengri this very winter. By next spring—" He cleared his throat and finished curtly: "Certain other projects will be well under way."

"How could it be an incitement, anyhow, your majesty?" argued Zalat, emboldened. "Who in Ulan Baligh could read it?"

"True. I can only conjecture, some wild act of defiance —or superstition, magical ritual—" The Khan turned on his heel. "You are leaving shortly, are you not?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"You shall convey a message. No other traders are to come here for a standard year. We will have troubles enough, suppressing the Tebtengri and their aboriginal allies." Oleg shrugged. "In any event, it would be useless for merchants to visit us. War will disrupt the caravans. Afterward—perhaps."

Privately, he doubted it. By summer, the Merseians would have returned and started work on their base. A year from now, Altai would be firmly in their empire, and, under them, the Kha Khan would lead his warriors to battles in the stars, more glorious than any of the hero songs had ever dreamed.

Winter came early to the northlands. Flandry, following the Mangu Tuman in their migratory cycle, saw snow endless across the plains, under a sky like blued steel. The tribe, wagons and herds and people, were a hatful of dust strewn on immensity: here a moving black blot, there a thin smoke-streak vertical in windless air. Krasna hung low in the southeast, a frosty red-gold wheel.

Three folk glided from the main ordu. They were on ski, rifles slung behind their parkas, hands holding tethers which led to a small negagrav tow unit. It flew quickly, so that the skis sang on the thin crisp snow.

Arghun Tiliksky said hard-voiced: "I can appreciate that you and Juchi keep secret the reason for that Tower escapade of yours, five weeks ago. What none of us know, none can reveal if captured. Yet you seem quite blithe about the consequences. Our scouts tells us that infuriated warriors flock to Oleg Khan, that he has pledged to annihilate us this very year. In consequence, all the Tebtengri must remain close together, not spread along the whole Arctic



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Circle as before—and hereabouts, there is not enough forage under the snow for that many herds. I say to you, the Khan need only wait, and by the end of the season famine will have done half his work for him!"

"Let's hope he plans on that," said Flandry. "Less strenuous than fighting, isn't it?"

Arghun's angry young face turned toward him. The noyon clipped: "I do not share this awe of all things Terran. You are as human as I. In this environment, where you are untrained, you are much more fallible. I warn you plainly, unless you give me good reason to do otherwise, I shall request a kurultai. And at it I will argue that we strike now at Ulan Baligh, try for a decision while we can still count on full bellies."

Bourtai cried aloud, "No! That would be asking for ruin. They outnumber us down there, three or four to one. And I have seen some of the new engines the Merseians brought. It would be butchery!"

"It would be quick." Arghun glared at Flandry. "Well?"

The Terran sighed. He might have expected it. Bourtai was always near him, and Arghun was always near Bourtai, and the officer had spoken surly words before now. He might have known that this invitation to hunt a flock of sataru—mutant ostriches escaped from the herds and gone wild—masked something else. At least it was decent of Arghun to warn him.

"If you don't trust me," he said, "though Lord knows I've fought and bled and frostbitten my nose in your cause—can't you trust Juchi Ilyak? He and the Dwellers know my little scheme; they'll assure you it depends on our hanging back and avoiding battle."

"Juchi grows old," said Arghun. "His mind is as feeble as— Hoy, there!"

He yanked a guide line. The negagrav unit purred to a stop and hung in air, halfway up a long slope. His politics dropped from Arghun, he pointed at the snow with a hunting dog's eagerness. "Spoor," he hissed. "We go by muscle power now, to sneak close. The birds can outrun this motor if they hear it. Do you go straight up this hill, Orluk Flandry; Bourtai and I will come around on opposite sides of it—".

The Altaians had slipped their reins and skied noiselessly from him before Flandry



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quite understood what had happened. Looking down, the Terran saw big splay tracks: a pair of sataru. He started after them. How the deuce did you manage these foot-sticks, anyway? Waddling across the slope, he tripped himself and went down. His nose clipped a boulder. He sat up, swearing in eighteen languages and Old Martian phonoglyphs.

"This they call fun?" He tottered erect. Snow had gotten under his parka hood. It began to melt, trickling over his ribs in search of a really good place to refreeze. "Great greasy comets," said Flandry, "I might have been sitting in the Everest House with a bucket of champagne, lying to some beautiful wench about my exploits . . . but no, I had to come out here and do 'em!"

Slowly, he dragged himself up the hill, crouched on its brow, and peered through an unnecessarily cold and thorny bush. No two-legged birds, only a steep slant back down to the plain . . . Wait!

He saw blood and the dismembered avian shapes an instant before the beasts attacked him.

They seemed to rise from weeds and snowdrifts, as if the earth had spewed them. Noiselessly they rushed in, a dozen white scuttering forms big as police dogs. Flandry glimpsed long sharp noses, alert black eyes that hated him, high backs and hairless tails. He yanked his rifle loose and fired. The slug bowled the nearest animal over. It rolled halfway downhill, lay a while, and crawled back to fight some more.

Flandry didn't see it. The next was upon him. He shot it point blank. One of its fellows crouched to tear the flesh. But the rest ran on. Flandry took aim at a third. A heavy body landed between his shoulders. He went down, and felt jaws rip his leather coat.

He rolled over, somehow, shielding his face with one arm. His rifle had been torn from him: a beast fumbled it in forepaws almost like hands. He groped for the dagger at his belt. Two of the animals were on him, slashing with chisel teeth. He managed to kick one in the nose. It squealed, bounced away, sprang back with a couple of new arrivals to help.

Someone yelled. It sounded very far off, drowned by Flandry's own heartbeat. The Terran drove his knife into a hairy shoulder. The beast writhed free, leaving him weaponless. Now they were piling on him where he lay.



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He fought with boots and knees, fists and elbows, in a cloud of kicked-up snow. An animal jumped in the air, came down on his midriff. The wind whoofed out of him. His face-defending arm dropped, and the creature went for his throat.

Arghun came up behind. The Altaian seized the animal by the neck. His free hand flashed steel, he disembowled it and flung it toward the pack in one expert movement. Several of them fell on the still snarling shape and fed. Arghun booted another exactly behind the ear. It dropped as if poleaxed. One jumped from the rear, to get on his back. He stooped, his right hand made a judo heave, and as the beast soared over his head he ripped its stomach with his knife.

"Up, man!" He hoisted Flandry. The Terran stumbled beside him, while the pack chattered around. Now its outliers began to fall dead: Bourtai had regained the hillcrest and was sniping. The largest of the animals whistled. At that signal, the survivors bounded off. They were lost to view in seconds.

When they had reached Bourtai, Arghun sank down gasping. The girl flew to Flandry. "Are you hurt?" she sobbed.

"Only in my pride — I guess—" He looked past her to the noyon. "Thanks," he said inadequately.

"You are a guest," grunted Arghun. After a moment: "They grow bolder each year. I had never expected to be attacked this near an ordu. Something must be done about them, if we live through the winter."

"What are they?" Flandry shuddered toward relaxation.

"Gurchaku. They range in packs over all the steppes, up into the Khrebet. They will eat anything, but prefer meat. Chiefly sataru and other feral animals, but they raid our herds, have killed people—" Arghun looked grim. "They were not as large in my grandfather's day, nor as cunning."

Flandry nodded. "Rats. Which is not an exclamation."

"I know what rats are," said Bourtai. "But the gurchaku—"

"A new genus. Similar things have happened on other colonized planets." Flandry wished for a cigaret. He wished so hard that Bourtai had to remind him before he continued: "Oh, yes. Some of the stowaway rats on your ancestors' ships must have gone into the wilds, as these began to be Terrestrialized. Size was



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advantageous: helped them keep warm, enabled them to prey on the big animals you were developing. Selection pressure, short generations, genetic drift within a small original population . . . Nature is quite capable of forced-draft evolution on her own hook."

He managed a tired grin at Bourtai. "After all," he said, "if a frontier planet has beautiful girls, tradition requires that it have monsters as well."

Her blush was like fire.

They returned to camp in silence. Flandry entered the yurt given him, washed and changed clothes, lay down on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. He reflected bitterly on all the Terran romancing he had ever heard, the High Frontier in general and the dashing adventurers of the Intelligence Corps in particular. So what did it amount to? A few nasty moments with men or giant rats that wanted to kill you; stinking leather clothes, wet feet, chilblains and frostbite, unseasoned food, creaking wheels exchanged for squealing runners; temperance, chastity, early rising, weighty speech with tribal elders, not a book he could enjoy or a joke he could understand for light-years. He yawned, rolled over on his stomach, tried to sleep, gave up after a while, and began to wish Arghun's reckless counsel would be accepted. Anything to break this dreariness!

It tapped on the door. He started to his feet, bumped his head on a curved ridgepole, swore, and said: "Come in." The caution of years laid his hand on a blaster.

The short day was near an end, only a red streak above one edge of the world. His lamp picked out Bourtai. She entered, closed the door, and stood unspeaking.

"Why . . . hullo." Flandry paused. "What brings you here?"

"I came to see if you were indeed well." Her eyes did not meet his.

"Oh? Oh, yes. Yes, of course," he said stupidly. "Kind of you. I mean, uh, shall I make some tea?"

"If you were bitten, it should be tended," said the girl. "Gurchaku bites can be infectious."

"No, thanks, I escaped any actual wounds." Automatically, Flandry added with a smile: "I could wish otherwise, though. So fair a nurse—"

Again he saw the blood rise in her face. Suddenly he un-



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derstood. He would have realized earlier, had these people not been more reticent than his own. A heavy pulse beat in his throat. "Sit down," he invited.

She lowered herself to the floor. He joined her, sliding a practiced arm over her shoulder. She did not flinch. He let his hand glide lower, till the arm was around her waist. She leaned against him.

"Do you think we will see another springtime?" she asked. Her tone grew steady once more, it was a quite practical question.

"I have one right here with me," he said. His lips brushed her dark hair.

"No one speaks thus in the ordu," she breathed. Quickly: "We are both cut off from our kindred, you by distance and I by death. Let us not remain lonely."

He forced himself to give fair warning: "I shall return to Terra the first chance I get."

"I know," she cried, "but until then—"

His lips found hers.

There was a thump on the door.

"Go away!" Flandry and Bourtai said it together, looked surprised into each other's eyes, and laughed with pleasure.

"My lord," called a man's voice, "Toghrul Gur-Khan sends me. A message has been picked up—a Terran spaceship!"

Flandry knocked Bourtai over in his haste to get outside. But even as he ran, he thought with frustration that this job had been hoodooed from the outset.

Among the thin winds over Ulan Baligh, hidden by sheer height, a warrior sat in the patient arms of a medusa. He breathed oxygen from a tank and rested numbed fingers on a small radio transceiver. After four hours he was relieved; perhaps no other breed of human could have endured so long a watch.

Finally he was rewarded. His earphones crackled with a faint, distorted voice, speaking no language he had ever heard. A return beam gabbled from the spaceport. The man up above gave place to another, who spoke a halting, accented Altaian, doubtless learned from the Betelgeuseans.

The scout of the Tebtengri dared not try any communication of his own. If detected (and the chances were that it would be) such a call would bring a nuclear missile streaking upward from Ulan Baligh.



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However, his transceiver could amplify and relay what came to it. Medusae elsewhere carried similar sets: a long chain, ending in the ordu of Toghrul Vavilov. Were that re-transmission intercepted by the enemy, no one would be alarmed. They would take it for some freak of reflection off the ionisphere.

The scout's binoculars actually showed him the Terran spaceship as it descended. He whistled in awe at its sleek, armed swiftness. Still, he thought, it was only one vessel, paying a visit to Oleg the Damned, who had carefully disguised all his modern installations. Oleg would be like butter to his guests, they would see what he wished them to see and no more. Presently they would go home again, to report that Altai was a harmless half-barbaric outpost, safely forgettable.

The scout sighed, beat gloved hands together, and wished his relief would soon arrive.

And up near the Arctic Circle, Dominic Flandry turned from Toghrul's receiver. A frosted window framed his head with the early northern night. "That's it," he said. "We'll maintain our radio monitors, but I don't expect to pick up anything else interesting, except the moment when the ship takes off again."

"When will that be?" asked the Gur-Khan.

"In a couple of days, I imagine," said Flandry. "We've got to be ready! All the tribesmen must be alerted, must move out on the plains according to the scheme Juchi and I drew up for you."

Toghrul nodded. Arghun Tiliksky, who had also crowded into the kibitka, demanded: "What scheme is this? Why have I not been told?"

"You didn't need to know," Flandry answered. Blandly: "The warriors of Tebtengri can be moving at top speed, ready for battle, on five minutes' notice, under any conditions whatsoever. Or so you were assuring me, in a ten-minute speech, one evening last week. Very well, move them, noyon!"

Arghun bristled. "And then—"

"You will lead the Mangu Tuman varyak division straight south for 500 kilometors," said Torghrul. "There you will await radio orders. The other tribal forces will be stationed elsewhere; you will doubtless see a few, but strict radio silence is to be maintained between you. The less mobile vehicles will



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have to stay in this general region, with the women and children maneuvering them."

"And the herds," reminded Flandry. "Don't forget, we can cover quite a large area with all the Tebtengri herds."

"But this is lunacy!" yelped Arghun. "If Oleg knows we're spread out in such a manner, and drives a wedge through—"

"He won't know," said Flandry. "Or if he does, he won't know why: which is what counts. Now, git!"

For a moment Arghun's eyes clashed with his. Then the noyon slapped gauntlets against one thigh, whirled, and departed. It was indeed only a few moments before the night grew loud with varyak motors and lowing battle horns.

When that had faded, Toghrul tugged his beard, looked across the radio, and said to Flandry: "Now can you tell me just what fetched that Terran spaceship here?"

"Why, to inquire more closely about the reported death of me, a Terran citizen, on Altai," grinned Flandry. "At least, if he is not a moron, that is what the captain will tell Oleg. And he will let Oleg convince him it was all a deplorable accident, and he'll take off again."

Toghrul stared, then broke into buffalo laughter. Flandry chimed in. For a while the Gur-Khan of the Mangu Tuman and the field agent of the Imperial Terrestrial Naval Intelligence Corps danced around the kibitka singing about the flowers that bloom in the spring.

Presently Flandry left. There wasn't going to be much sleep for anyone in the next few days. Tonight, though— He rapped eagerly on his own yurt. Silence answered him, the wind and a distant sad mewing of the herds. He scowled and opened the door.

A note lay on his bunk. *My beloved, the alarm signals have blown. Toghrul gave me weapons and a new varyak. My father taught me to ride and shoot as well as any man. It is only fitting that the last of Clan Tumurji go with the warriors.*

Flandry stared at the scrawl for a long while. Finally, "Oh, hell and tiddlywinks," he said, and undressed and went to bed.

When he woke in the morning, his cart was under way. He emerged to find the whole encampment grinding across the steppe. Toghrul stood to one side, taking a navigational sight on the rings. He greeted



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Flandry with a gruff: "We should be in our own assigned position tomorrow." A messenger dashed up, something needed the chief's attention, one of the endless emergencies of so big a group on the move. Flandry found himself alone.

By now he had learned not to offer his own unskilled assistance. He spent the day composing scurrilous limericks about the superiors who had assigned him to this mission. The trek continued noisily through the dark. Next morning there was drifted snow to clear before camp could be made. Flandry discovered that he was at least able to wield a snow shovel. Soon he wished he weren't.

By noon the ordu was settled; not in the compact standardized laagers which offered maximum safety, but straggling over kilometers in a line which brought mutinous grumbling. Toghrul roared down all protest and went back to his kibitka to crouch over the radio. After some hours he summoned Flandry.

"Ship departing," he said. "We've just picked up a routine broadcast warning aircraft from the spaceport area." He frowned. "Can we carry out all our maneuvers while we're still in daylight?"

"It doesn't matter," said Flandry. "Our initial pattern is already set up. Once he spots that from space—and he's pretty sure to, because it's routine to look as long and hard as possible at any doubtful planet—the skipper will hand around out there."

His gray eyes went to a map on the desk before him. The positions of all Tebtengri units had now been radio confirmed. As marked by Toghrul, the ordus lay in a heavy east-and-west line, 500 kilometers long across the winter-white steppe. The more mobile varyak divisions sprawled their bunches to form lines slanting past either end of the stationary one, meeting in the north. He stroked his mustache and waited.

*"Spaceship cleared for takeoff. Stand by. Rise, spaceship!"*

As the relayed voice trickled weakly from the receiver, Flandry snatched up a pencil and drew another figure under Toghrul's gaze. "This is the next formation," he said. "Might as well start it now, I think; the ship will have seen the present one in a few minutes."

The Gur-Khan bent over the microphone and rapped: "Varyak divisions of Clans Munlik, Fyodor, Kubilai, Tuli, at-



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tention! Drive straight west for 100 kilometers. Belgutai, Bagdarin, Chagatai, Kassar, due east for 100 kilometers. Gleb, Jahangir—"

Flandry rolled his pencil in tightened fingers. As the reports came in, over an endless hour, he marked where each unit had halted. The whole device began to look pathetically crude.

"I have been thinking," said Toghrul after a period of prolonged silence.

"Nasty habit," said Flandry. "Hard to break. Try cold baths and long walks."

"What if Oleg finds out about this?"

"He's pretty sure to discover something is going on. His air scouts will pick up bits of our messages. But only bits, since these are short-range transmissions. I'm depending on our own air cover to keep the enemy from getting too good a look at what we're up to. All Oleg will know is, we're maneuvering around on a large scale." Flandry shrugged. "It would seem most logical to me, if I were him, that the Tebtengri were practicing formations against the day he attacks."

"Which is not far off." Toghrul drummed the desk top.

Flandry drew a figure on his paper. "This one next," he said.

"Yes." Toghrul gave the orders. Afterward: "We can continue through dark, you know. Light bonfires. Send airboats loaded with fuel to the varyak men, so they can do the same."

"That would be well."

"Of course," frowned the chief, "it will consume an unholy amount of fuel. More than we can spare."

"Don't worry about that," said Flandry. "Before the shortage gets acute, your people will be safe, their needs supplied from outside—or they'll be dead, which is still more economical."

The night wore on. Now and then Flandry dozed. He paid scant heed to the sunrise; he had only half completed his job. Sometime later a warrior was shown in. "From Juchi Shaman," he reported, with a clumsy salute. "Airscouts watching the Ozero Rurik area report massing of troops, outrider columns moving northward."

Toghrul smote the desk with one big fist. "Already?" he said.

"It'll take them a few days to get their big push this far," said Flandry, though his guts felt cold at the news. "Longer,



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if we harry them from the air. All I need is one more day, I think."

"But when can we expect help?" said Toghrul.

"Not for another three or four weeks at the very least," said Flandry. "Word has to reach Catawrayayannis Base, its commandant has to patch together a task force which has to get here. Allow a month, plus or minus. Can we retreat that long, holding the enemy off without undue losses to ourselves?"

"We had better," said Toghrul, "or we are done."

Captain Flandry laid the rifle stock to his shoulder. Its plastic felt smooth and uncold, as nearly as his numbed cheek could feel anything. The chill of the metal parts, which would skin any fingers that touched them, bit through his gloves.

Hard to gauge distances in this red half-light, across this whining scud of snow. Hard to guess windage; even trajectories were baffling, on this miserable three-quarter-gee planet . . . He decided the opposition wasn't close enough yet, and lowered his gun.

Beside him, crouched in the same lee of a snowbank, the Dweller turned dark eyes upon the man. "I go now?" he asked. His Altaian was even worse than Flandry's, though Juchi himself had been surprised to learn that any of the Ice Folk knew the human tongue.

"I told you, no." Flandry's own accent was thickened by the frostbitten puffiness of his lips. "You must cross a hundred meters of open ground to reach those trees. Running, you would be seen and shot before going half way. Unless we can arrange a distraction—"

He peered again through the murk. Krasna had almost vanished from these polar lands for the winter, but was still not far below the horizon. There were still hours when a surly gleam in the south gave men enough light to see a little distance.

The attacking platoon was so close now that Flandry could make out blurred individuals, outlined against the great vague lake. He could see that they rode a sort of modified varyaks, with runners and low-powered negagrav thrust to drive them across the permasnow. It was sheer ill luck that he and his squad had blundered into them. But the past month, or however long, had been that sort of time. Juchi had withdrawn all his people into the depths of



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the Ice Lands, to live off a few kine slaughtered and frozen while their herds wandered the steppes under slight guard . . . while a front line of Tebtengri and Dwellers fought a guerrilla war to slow Oleg Khan's advance. . . . Skulk, shoot, run, hide, bolt your food, snatch a nap in a sleeping bag as dank as yourself, and go forth to skulk again. . . .

Now the rest of Flandry's party lay dead by Tengri Nor. And he himself, with this one companion, was trapped by a pursuit moving faster on machine than he could afoot.

He gauged his range afresh. Perhaps. He got his sights on a man in the lead and jerked his head at the Dweller, who slipped from him. Then he fired.

The southerner jerked in the saddle, caught at his belly, and slid slowly to the ground. Even in this glum light, his blood was a red shout on the snow. Through the wind, Flandry heard the others yell. They swept into motion, dispersing. He followed them with his sights, aimed at another, squeezed trigger again. A miss. This wasn't enough. He had to furnish a few seconds' diversion, so the Dweller could reach those crystalline trees at his back.

Flandry thumbed his rifle to automatic fire. He popped up, shooting, and called: "My grandmother can lick your grandmother!"

Diving, he sensed more than heard the lead storm that went where he had been. Energy bolts crashed through the air overhead, came down again and sizzled in the snow. He breathed hot steam. Surely that damned Dweller had gotten to the woods now! He fired, blind as the inward-rushing enemy. *Come on, someone, pull me out of this mess!—What use is it, anyhow? The little guy babbled about calling through the roots, letting all the forest know*—Through gun-thunder, Flandry heard the first high ringing noise. He raised his eyes in time to see the medusae attack.

They swarmed from above, hundreds upon hundreds, their tentacles full of minor lightning. Some were hit, burst into hydrogen flame, and sought men to burn even as they died. Others snatched warriors from the saddle, lifted them, and dropped them in the mortally cold waters of Tengri Nor. Most went efficiently about a task of electrocution. Flandry had not quite understood what happened before he saw the retreat be-



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gin. By the time he had climbed erect, it was a rout.

"Holy hopping hexaflexagons," he mumbled in awe. "Now why can't I do that stunt?"

The Dweller returned, small, furry, rubbery, an unimpressive goblin who said with shyness: "Not enough medusa for do this often. Your friends come. We wait."

"Huh? Oh . . . you mean a rescue party. Yeh, I suppose some of our units would have seen that flock arrive here and will come to investigate." Flandry stamped his feet, trying to force circulation back. "Nice haul," he said, looking over strewn weapons and vehicles. "I think we got revenge for our squad."

"Dead man just as dead on any side of fight," reproached the Dweller.

Flandry grimaced. "Don't remind me."

He heard the whirr of tow motors. The ski patrol which came around the woods was bigger than he had expected. He recognized Arghun and Bourtai at its head. It came to him, with a shock, that he hadn't spoken to either one, except to say hello-goodbye, since the campaign began. Too busy. That was the trouble with war. Leave out the toil, discipline, discomfort, scant sleep, lousy food, monotony, and combat, and war would be a fine institution.

He strolled to meet the newcomers, as debonairly as possible for a man without cigarets. "Hi," he said.

"Dominic . . . it was you—" Bourtai seized his hands. "You might have been killed!" she gasped.

"Occupational hazard," said Flandry. "I thought you were in charge of our western division, Arghun."

"No more fighting there," said the noyon. "I am going about gathering our troops."

"What?"

"Have you not heard?" The frank eyes widened. Arghun stood for a moment in the snow, gaping. Then a grin cracked his frozen mustache, he slapped Flandry's back and shouted: "The Terrans have arrived!"

"Huh?" Flandry felt stunned. The blow he had taken—Arghun owned a hefty set of muscles—wait, *what* had he said?

"Yesterday," chattered the Altaian. "I suppose your portable radio didn't pick up the news, nor anyone in that company you were fighting. Reception is poor in this area. Or maybe they were fanatics. There are some, whom we'll



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have to dispose of. But that should not be difficult."

He brought himself under control and went on more calmly: "A task force appeared and demanded the surrender of all Yesukai forces as being Merseian clients. The commander at Ulan Baligh yielded without a fight—what could he have done? Oleg Khan tried to rally his men at the front . . . oh, you should have been listening, the ether was lively last night! . . . but a couple of Terran spaceships flew up and dropped a demonstration bomb squarely on his headquarters. That was the end of that. The tribesmen of the Khanate are already disengaging and streaming south. Juchi Shaman has a call from the Terran admiral at Ulan Baligh, to come advise him what to do next—oh, yes, and bring you along—"

Flandry closed his eyes. He swayed on his feet, so that Bourtai caught him in her arms and cried, "What is it, my dear one?"

"Brandy," he whispered. "Tobacco. India tea. Shrimp mayonnaise, with a bottle of gray Riesling on the side. Air conditioning. . . ." He shook himself. "Sorry. My mind wandered."

He scarcely saw how her lip trembled. Arghun did, gave the Terran a defiant look, and caught the girl's hand in his own. She clung to that like a lost child.

This time Flandry did notice. His mouth twitched upward. "Bless you, my children," he murmured.

"What?" Arghun snapped it in an anger half bewilderment.

"When you get as old and battered as I," said Flandry, "you will realize that no one dies of a broken heart. In fact, it heals with disgusting speed. If you want to name your first-born Dominic, I will be happy to mail a silver spoon, suitably engraved."

"But—" stammered Bourtai. "But—" She gave up and held Arghun's hand more tightly.

The noyon's face burned with blood. He said hastily, seeking impersonal things: "*Now* will you explain your actions, Terra man?"

"Hm?" Flandry blinked. "Oh. Oh, yes. To be sure."

He started walking. The other two kept pace, along the thin blue Lake of Ghosts, under a lacework of icy leaves. The red halfday smoldered toward night. Flandry spoke, with laughter reborn in his voice:

"Our problem was to send a



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secret message. The most secret possible would, of course, be one which nobody recognized as a message. For instance, Mayday painted on the Prophet's Tower. It looked like gibberish, pure spiteful mischief . . . but all the city could see it. They'd talk. How they'd talk! Even if no Betelgeuseans happened to be at Ulan Baligh just then, there would soon be some, who would certainly hear news so sensational, no matter how closely they were guarded. And the Betelgeuseans in turn would carry the yarn home with them—where the Terrans connected with the Embassy would hear it. And the Terrans would understand!

"You see, Mayday is a very ancient code call on my planet. It means, simply, *Help me.*"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bourtai.

"Oh-ho," said Arghun. He slapped his thigh and his own laughter barked forth. "Yes, I see it now! Thanks, friends, for a joke to tell my grandchildren!"

"A classic," agreed Flandry with his normal modesty. "My corps was bound to send a ship to investigate. Knowing little or nothing, its men would be alert and wary. Oleg's tale of my accidental death, or whatever he told them, would be obvious seafood in view of that first message; but I figured I could trust them to keep their mouths shut, pretend to be taken in by him, until they could learn more. The problem now was, how to inform them exactly what the situation was—without Oleg knowing.

"Of course, you can guess how that was done: by maneuvering the whole Tebtengri Shamanate across the plain, to form Terran letters visible through a telescope. It could only be a short, simple note; but it served."

He filled his lungs with the keen air. Through all his weariness, the magnificence of being alive flowed up into him. He grinned and added, half to himself: "Those were probably the first secret messages ever sent in an alphabet ranging from one to five hundred kilometers tall."

**THE END**



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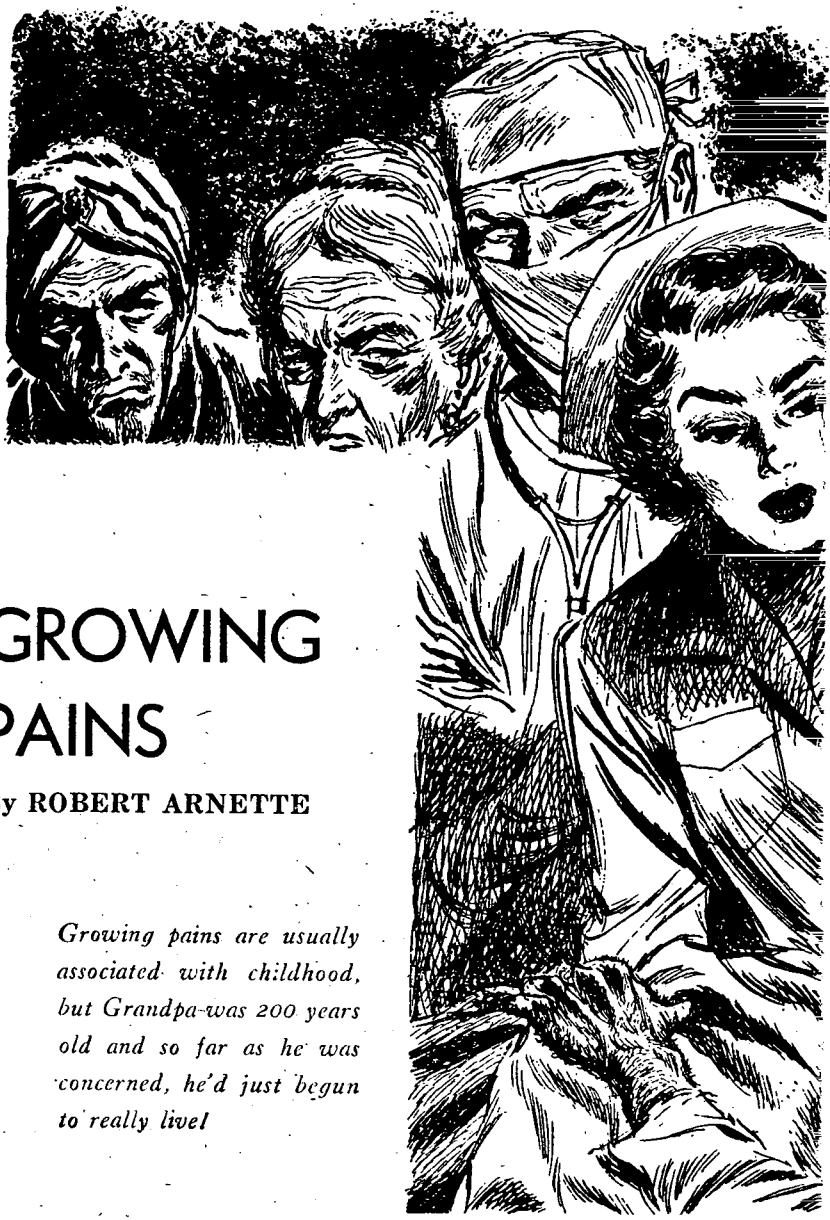

# GROWING PAINS

By ROBERT ARNETTE

*Growing pains are usually associated with childhood, but Grandpa was 200 years old and so far as he was concerned, he'd just begun to really live!*



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"IT SHOULD be a good party," Gordon Mosley said, eyeing the cakes, "a real good party."

The broad lucite table along one side of the clinic lab resembled a baking contest at the county fair. There were large cakes and small; pink, yellow and blue. An angelfood with thick, light frosting represented the labor of a farm woman over the Missouri line in Arkansas.

The biggest one, from a baker in Jefferson City, was studded with 200 candles.

"Too bad Gramp can't eat any," Dr. Alan Williams said.

"Why not?"

Alan turned from the window with a sigh. "Do you want to analyze for poison and put them back together again?"

"No thanks," Gordon answered. "Is that why Irene's whipping up another one out in the kitchen?"

"That's why. And you'll analyze a piece of that, too, just to be sure no one doped the sugar."

"Who'd want to kill Gramp?" Gordon asked. "He's the greatest old guy in the world."

"Every stupid fanatic this side of China wants to kill him," Alan scowled and said bitterly.

Several hundred people had gathered for Gramp's birthday, but not all to help celebrate it . . .

The murmuring crowd was invisible behind the high brick wall, but you could see on down the wooded slope to where the setting sun cast

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coins of silver along a finger of the Lake of the Ozarks.

"Twelve hours and Gramp will be 200," Alan said absently, "at 5:30 a.m. September 23. If he lives through the night, we're all right."

"How is he?"

"Sleeping." Alan scribbled a new entry in the case history that already filled a filing cabinet. "In the past week he's averaged 23 hours sleep a day. I'm afraid he's sleeping himself to death."

Dr. Williams walked nervously to the other window and stared up the hill to the small, ancient cottage where Gramp lived. A plastic window flashed golden in the late sun. The rich fragrance of baking drifted in from the lab kitchen.

For the first time, Alan wondered if he, and his father before, had been right in devoting their lives to one case history, to give all their energies and the science of gerontology to one man.

Had they been right in keeping a man alive for 200 years?

A large part of the crowded, frightened world said "no." And that part would do many things to keep Gramp from living 12 more hours.

"I wish I knew what's going on in that old carcas," Alan mused. He missed the figure of the shrunken old man, his skin wrinkled and brown, eyes bright and intelligent, walking slowly around the cottage. For the past week Gramp had not stirred from his bed. All his physical activity, it seemed, was slowing to a stop.

"Do you think he'll make it?" Gordon asked.

"I don't know. There's nothing more I can do. We fixed his heart. Blood vessels are elastic. We built in an artificial kidney when he almost died 13 years ago. The aldosterone shots are keeping his glands in balance. Metabolism's good and there's not a malignant growth in his body. There's only one other thing we know that a man needs to stay alive—that's an interest in being alive."

"He's had that," Gordon said. "He's all fired up writing his memoirs, and they're good. He's proud of that closet full of manuscript."

"But that's stopped, too," Alan said. "It worries me. He's in a progressive coma, while every measurable function of his body goes on without serious change. I don't see how he can die, but I'm afraid that's what he's doing.



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Did you see the last entry in his diary?"

"Yeah. I've got it here." Gordon pulled out a sheet of paper, half-filled with Gramp's neat, archaic handwriting.

" 'Something wonderful is happening . . .' " he read aloud.

"That's the last sentence," Alan said. "He didn't put a period at the end, as though he were too tired. But it's a clear thought, and he dropped it halfway down the page as though he were beginning something new."

Twilight crept across the Ozarks while the sun played a gaudy color game across the sky.

"You're too sensitive to the old guy," Gordon said. "Why don't you get some sleep? You've been with him for 15 years and you know every cell in his body. If he dies, you've done your best."

"I suppose you're right."

"You know," Gordon said, "there really may be a point beyond which God doesn't intend a man to live."

"Don't say that!" Alan snapped. "You sound like that gang of idiots camped down the hill, mumbling the superstitious gibberish they call religion."

"Sorry."

"I didn't mean to blow up," Alan grinned crookedly. "Certainly God alone knows what's happening to the old boy, but some of that crowd sounds vicious."

The kitchen door swung open and Irene came out, carrying a three-layer cake with white icing. She wore an apron over her nurse uniform.

"Here it is," she said gaily, "wouldn't you like a piece?"

"Run some tests on it, Gordon."

"Tests?" Irene put the cake on the doctor's desk. "What tests?"

"For poison."

"You think I'd poison the old guy after working for you and him 10 years?"

"Not you," Alan said. "Someone."

"Sorry to spoil it," Gordon said. He deftly sliced out a portion of cake and moved to his lab desk.

The gate guard came in. He had been hired to keep out the crowds, but the six-foot stone wall wouldn't discourage anyone who wanted it badly enough to bring a ladder.

"That Mrs. Bradenburg's here again," he said, "wants to talk to you, doc."

"What the devil does she want this time?"

"Don't know. She—"

"She wants to talk to Dr.



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Williams," a baritone voice boomed behind him.

"Come in," Alan said reluctantly. "We're about to have supper."

"I won't keep you." Mrs. Bradenburg's heavy masculine figure was clothed in a wrinkled gray uniform of the welfare service. Grayshot hair was cut straight and severely at the neckline. Her flat eyes carried a sadistic glint that comes from too many years of saying "no" to starving transients, destitute women and hungry children. Mrs. Bradenburg was state director of services for the aged.

She plopped down at Alan's desk and crossed her fat legs.

"I want to know if you intend to continue this stupid experiment," she said abruptly.

"Continue?" The question thoroughly surprised him. "Of course, I'll continue as many years as Gramp lives."

"I don't mean that," Mrs. Bradenburg snapped. "I mean the next 11 hours. Are you going to keep him alive until his birthday?"

The cold-bloodedness of the woman unnerved him, but Alan controlled the rage creeping like acid through his flesh.

"You think I should kill him?"

"You could let him die," she said nonchalantly, fumbling in her massive shoulder bag. She pulled out a St. Louis newspaper. "See that headline?"

Alan read it.

ONLY 16 HOURS UNTIL GRAMP HITS 200.

He handed back the paper without reading the story.

"Every newspaper in the country looks like that," the woman rumbled, her voice increasing in pitch and intensity. "The world is waiting for this symbolic moment—" she slapped the paper on the desk like a club—"this moment when the first man on earth is 200 years old. All the old people are waiting, because if one man can do it, they think they can."

"Is that bad?"

"Of course it's bad! You're destroying the world. Half the population of the world is being taxed to death right now to keep the old people alive. If you won't let 'em die, how can we take care of 'em?"

"Oh, for God's sake," Alan muttered. "Welfare isn't my problem. Old people can work if government and industry will let them."

Mrs. Bradenburg stood up,



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paced nervously around the room. She peered over Gordon's shoulder and fingered the rack of syringes on the table.

"My job is to keep people alive," Alan said. "I'll keep Gramp alive as long as I can."

"That's your last word?" Her face had now purpled with anger.

"That's it. And you'd better take some shots for those arteries. You're showing signs of sclerosis."

The welfare director stalked out of the lab. The gate guard crept in past her at the door.

"Now it's the Krishna," he said apologetically.

"Oh Lord! Not that, too."

"He's headin' for the cottage."

"What?"

"Had two thugs with him. I couldn't keep them out."

Alan toppled a chair getting out the door and raced up the gravel path toward the cottage.

Near the front he intercepted the Krishna, flanked by two burly guards, striding majestically toward Gramp's home. The self-appointed religious leader's white satin robe dragged the ground, its hem frayed and soiled. The garment was bound at the waist with a hemp rope blackened with years of dirt and grease.

"What do you want?" Alan snapped.

"Peace," boomed the Krishna, raising a huge hand in benediction. "I wish to confer blessings upon the old man."

"What blessings?"

The Krishna's band of phrenetic followers had come with him a month ago to camp on the hillside below the laboratory and Gramp's cottage.

"The blessings of Heaven," the Krishna said, "for his hour is at hand."

"Not yet," Alan said thinly, "he's still alive."

"Not for long." The prophet's voice lowered in pitch, his flat blue eyes gleaming. "I have prophesied he shall not reach his 200th birthday. It is God's will that man's days be numbered. You tamper with ways of the devil."

"Nonsense!" Anger crept through his blood. A poison mist of menace settled over the hillside. "God has given me the task of keeping men alive."

"He shall die," the Krishna intoned, moving his fingers to form a cryptic symbol, "before the dawn."

"Get out." Alan's fists



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clenched. "Get out of here. Now!"

He started forward but the guards blocked his path.

"No violence," the Krishna boomed. The guards fell back. "Ours is the way of peace, but God's justice will come upon you. The old man shall not live."

"If he lives, your followers will be less faithful with their nickels and dimes. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

The Krishna's eyes narrowed, but he did not answer. Instead he turned pompously and strode down the hill. The two thugs glared back as they followed their leader.

Then a violent trembling beset Alan's hands and thighs, reaction to the adrenalin his glands had poured into his blood at the threat of violence.

With the trembling came disgust that he should lose control so easily; revulsion that man in his advance through the centuries could not weed out the terrible traits of intolerance, fear and fanaticism.

Mrs. Bradenburg, the efficient civil servant, wished the old people to die so her job would be less difficult. The Krishna typified the diseased clots of humanity which always had distorted the word of God to fit their own mercenary wishes and beliefs.

Alan waited on the path while the eastern sky sent its dark blue of night sliding to the west. He shivered involuntarily despite the sultry warmth of the evening. Sweat trickled cold down his back.

Light flashed on the path as the laboratory door burst open. Gordon ran up the hill.

"Look," he panted, holding something in the palm of his hand. Alan bent in the failing light to see a smudge of white powder.

"What is it?"

"Pulverized glass," Gordon said, "in the cake Irene baked. It must have been in the flour."

Alan nodded, a great weariness gripping him. Gramp was dying, but the world was anxious to help him on his way.

"That was a new bag of flour," Gordon said angrily. "I'm going to find out who's responsible."

"Not now. We found it in time. Tonight we've got to keep watch. If Gramp lives, tomorrow will be time enough to investigate."

"Okay, if you say so," Gordon answered reluctantly, dusting his hand on his trousers. He looked up at the



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first stars. Far down the hill a baby cried in the stillness. "Seems like the whole universe is waiting to see if Gramp makes it. Why is tonight a crisis?"

"I wish I knew," Alan said moodily. "I'm going to check him now. Tell Irene to bring up his intravenous."

Gordon returned to the lab. The doctor opened the cottage door softly, afraid he would find death there already.

It was dark inside. He switched on the night light beside Gramp's bed. Then he exhaled the breath he had been holding unconsciously.

The old man was alive, his respiration almost imperceptible in the slight movement of his thin chest under the sheet.

From the routine of centuries, Alan felt the pulse. Normal, if you could define normal at this age. He listened to Gramp's chest. No lung congestion. Heart strong.

But the old man did not move. He had not moved for 24 hours. His skin held the normal color of blood coursing beneath wrinkled epidermis.

But the skin was cold.

As cold as death.

Alan leaned back and pressed his temples, trying to conjure the answer, aware of the pitifully short distance his knowledge and research had carried him up the endless ladder of man's cry for immortality.

He didn't hear Irene come in.

He peeled back an eyelid. The bright blue eye stared back at him, aware and intelligent.

"He can see us!" Irene exclaimed. "I swear he knows what we're doing."

Alan nodded, a prickle of the unknown creeping up his spine—*witchcraft and devils and voodoo.* A small electric clock whirred quietly in a dark corner of the room. The nurse glanced nervously over her shoulder.

"I've got the creeps," she whispered. "It's like angels dancing on the ends of my nerves—or devils."

"I know what you mean," the doctor said, and somehow her remark sounded neither ridiculous nor superstitious. The cottage and the night had the feel of pending change.

"Perhaps death has a special ceremony for a man this old," he said quietly, not sure if he believed it or not. "Give me the syringe."

Irene handed him the instrument, removing sterile cotton from the needle.



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From habit Alan held the tube to the light to check the level of the fluid.

"Where did you get this?" he asked sharply.

"From the rack in the lab," Irene said nervously, "where we always keep it."

"Doesn't look right," Alan muttered. At the risk of contaminating the fluid, he unscrewed the needle and sniffed. Then he tipped the tube to his lips and tasted.

"Water!" he exclaimed. "Not even sterile water. Tastes like it came out of a stagnant ditch. With that in his veins, Gramp would be dead in an hour."

"That woman," Irene cried in dismay. "That awful woman!"

"What woman?"

"Mrs. Bradenburg," the nurse said, "she was over there by the table. She could have switched them."

"I suppose you're right," Alan said. His hand trembled as he spilled the water on the floor, watched the deadly stain blacken a patch of the rug.

"Get Gordon to fill a fresh one," he said. "Then call the state police and have Mrs. Bradenburg arrested."

The reaction was the same as sticking a needle into a corpse. But Gramp's fragile respiration continued unchanged. A drop of blood oozed out behind the needle and clotted cleanly.

Later Alan stood outside in the sultry darkness, listening to the hypnotic buzz of locusts. He had witnessed death only a few times, but it's odor was in the air tonight, soft and not unpleasant like the first yellow leaf trembling down from a maple tree.

A flare of heat lightning blazed in the northwest.

"Shall I watch first?" Irene asked.

"Yes, if you will. I'm tired. Let Gordon relieve you and wake me at three."

It seemed only a moment later that he writhed in the torment of a nightmare. The mob, screaming for blood, poured inside the walls, torches waving high, and leading them were Mrs. Bradenburg and the Krishna, his white robe flapping in the wind.

They ripped his clothes, tearing him away from the door of the cottage, and the welfare woman's talons dug into the flesh of his shoulder . . .

"Sorry, doc." It was Gordon's hand on his shoulder. "It's 3 a. m. Irene said you left orders to be wakened."



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"Yes," Alan mumbled, sitting up. "Yes, thanks."

The nightmare faded as his senses cleared. He felt doped and his shirt and trousers were soaked with sweat. Distant thunder muttered through the open window.

Gordon walked back with him to the cottage.

"Storm brewing," Mosley said, "but I think it'll pass around."

"How is he?"

"All right, I think." Gordon opened the door. Alan leaned over the bed.

"He's stopped breathing!"

The doctor ripped back the sheet and placed his hand on Gramp's chest. The flesh was cold.

But the heart was beating —faintly, rhythmically.

"Doc—" Gordon whispered as though he must be in tune with the night, "—I don't think he's dying at all."

Alan turned sharply. "Do you know how death comes to a man this old?"

"No. I admit I'm no doctor, but I've seen people die. Look at this."

Mosley turned the sheet back a little more and tried gently to lift Gramp's arm. It was rigid as the branch of a fallen tree.

"The legs are the same," he said.

"Rigor mortis," Alan whispered.

"Rigor mortis? And the heart still beating?" He stared bewildered at the doctor. Alan shook his head.

"I don't know. We can only wait and see."

It must have been this way more than a century ago when a doctor sat beside the bed of a child dying of pneumonia, before antibiotics; when there was nothing more that could be done and the doctor knew the knife thrust of inadequacy.

Sometimes, in those days, there was a crisis past and a child lived.

This crisis, too, might pass, permitting an old man to see the dawn of 200 years.

But the thought was alien to the rigid controls Alan had buckled to his emotions. He knew Gramp would die someday. But he had tried to think of the gentle, wise old man simply as a clinical case to be written up in the medical journals after death as a stepping stone for another old man or woman to live a year longer.

Gordon tiptoed out. Alan wondered lethargically why it was so important that his patient should live another few hours. The importance



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was symbolic, of course, a stubborn pride in proving that it could be done, that man could round a second century.

But this morning, the ancient clock and its storehouse of years seemed geared to a time bomb, the explosive moment that would tell life from death.

A flash of lightning drew Alan's eye to the window, held it in the afterimage of cloth whipping in the rising wind.

What cloth?

He leaped from the chair as a jet of blue flame spurted through the window. A heavy explosion jarred him, ripped a two-foot hole in the opposite wall of the room.

In that instant, while his body hurtled toward the window, he realized someone had fired a high-caliber explosive bullet—intended for Gramp.

With a bellow of rage, Alan plunged out the open window, ripping through the cloth screen already perforated by the gun blast. He forgot the lilac bush until he was thrashing in the broken branches.

Lightning flashed again, not far away, as he tore free. He saw the running figure not 50 feet away, the bizarre silhouette of a squat, masculine witch with cloak flapping wildly in the wind.

"Stop!"

Alan raced through the darkness, guided by the sound of heavy feet running toward the wall. As his mind cleared of shock, he remembered that part of the wall. An oak tree grew almost against it, branches sweeping low to afford an easy swing over the brick barricade.

The wall was only 100 feet away, but he was gaining. Now he could hear the gunman, panting heavily.

Lightning flashed again.

The tail of the Krishna's robe whipped out behind him, almost in Alan's grasp.

But the oak was nearer. He saw a shimmer of white as the Krishna leaped high for the low-hanging branch.

Alan leaped, too, in a desperate flying tackle. His clutching fingers tangled in cloth, grasped a bony ankle.

The doctor hit the earth with a sickening thud, but the Krishna came crashing down out of the tree with him.

Alan had a knee in his gut when lightning flashed again.

But this time the lightning was a clubbed fist on the back of his neck. The Krishna's buddies had come along.

Alan came out of it fighting.

"Take it easy, doc. It's me, Gordon. Ouch!"



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The lab assistant was trying to hold his arms, but Alan landed a kick on the shin before he quieted. He could see the pale, worried oval of Irene's face hovering mistily above him.

"They got away," he mumbled. "How is he? How's Gramp?"

"Easy, Doc. We haven't checked yet. We heard you yell and this ruckus in the trees and came running."

Alan scrambled to his feet, a burr of pain gnawing at the base of his skull. He staggered, but Gordon and Irene caught him.

"They shot him," he gasped, realizing he had left his patient for this wild, useless chase through the dark. "They shot Gramp!"

He ran unsteadily to the cottage, burst open the door. The two crowded in behind him.

Gramp lay still as death on the bed. But the explosive charge apparently had missed him. Alan collapsed in the chair.

"It was the Krishna and his gang," he explained. "Shot through the window. Blew a hole in the wall over there."

Gordon squatted to examine the ragged opening where the charge had exploded at the baseboard. He squinted at the window and back again.

"Did you move Gramp's bed, Doc?"

"No, why?"

"Come here and look."

Alan crouched painfully on his hands and knees and sighted along Gordon's pointing finger.

"See what I mean?"

Alan saw it, but he didn't believe it. He scrambled to the window. Placing his head at the exact point where the gun had been fired, he sighted again.

The point of impact on the wall was out of sight behind the bed.

"The bullet—" Irene whispered.

"Unless we're all crazy," Alan moistened dry lips, "that bullet entered under Gramp's right clavicle, tore through his chest and went out through the mattress!"

He examined the old man again. There was no sign of an entering wound.

"Here it is!" Gordon had searched along the edge of the mattress. He found a rent in the fabric and fragments of foam rubber where the bullet had ripped out.

"He turned the bullet—" Irene's knuckles were white against her mouth. "He made



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the bullet go around him!" She was near hysteria.

"Don't be an idiot!" Alan barked. "He hasn't the energy to move an arm. And don't pull any supernatural claptrap on me. There's an explanation somewhere."

Gordon's eyes were skeptical and frightened.

"All right say it," Alan said angrily, "what do you suggest?" The lab assistant shrugged his shoulders.

"We could move him and—and see if there's a wound where the bullet came out and went through the bed."

"There's no blood." Alan shook his head. "He's so near death we don't dare move him."

That was reason enough. But Alan knew, in addition, he couldn't trust his mind to accept what they would find under the old man. If there was no wound but a punctured sheet and mattress . . .

"No. We can't move him."

"Okay." Gordon exhaled heavily. "It'll probably make more sense in daylight. Let me take the watch now, Doc. You get some sleep."

"No." Alan shook his head stubbornly. "I'll see him through. I don't think they'll be back."

"You sure you're good for another two hours?"

"I'm sure."

"All right. Come on Irene. We'll send down some coffee after a while."

The bulk of the storm passed to the south, but the skirt of the huge cloud brushed the land with a light drizzle and gentle breeze.

Under the hypnotic spell of rain spattering from the eaves, both the pain and tension oozed out of Alan's body. Somehow the electric charge of danger seemed gone from the night and the cool, washed dawn was not far away.

He didn't remember when he fell asleep.

When he awoke, dawn was there, gray and lucid before the sunrise.

Alan looked at the dial of his watch, still luminous in the half darkness. Five a. m. He yawned and peered out the window before turning to the bed.

Only 30 minutes more and Gramp . . .

Gramp was gone!

He stared at the empty bed for several seconds before comprehending. The sheet and blanket were turned back, neatly, and the imprint was there where the old man had lain immobile for nearly a week.

At the point where the ab-



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dominal cavity had been was a tattered hole where a bullet had ploughed into the mattress. No blood.

And Gramp was gone.

Although stunned, doc didn't panic. He threw open the closet door. Gramp's clothes were there. Wherever he was, he was wearing only the white, sleeveless hospital gown.

Then he opened the front door. The surface of the gravel path was undisturbed. Flower beds beside the door were muddy from the rain, but the grass beyond would show no tracks—if Gramp left any.

The old man couldn't have moved by himself. That meant someone had entered the cottage while the doctor slept and carried Gramp away.

The frail old body was light, but even so there should be some mark in the gravel.

"Gordon, come here! Irene!" Alan yelled, running toward the clinic. They ran to meet him. He related rapidly what had happened. The three scatteerd over the grounds, searching.

They found nothing.

"He couldn't just up and fly away," Irene said, "could he?"

"I was asleep," Alan said dully. "Someone carried him."

"How?" Gordon asked. "There's a hundred people milling around outside the gate."

"Call the state police."

"I did, two hours ago. They've got Mrs. Bradenburg and the Krishna in custody. And there's been a patrol car making the rounds ever since our wild-eyed friend took that pot shot."

Alan hurried to the front gate with Gordon and Irene just as the black patrol hemisphere glided to a stop.

"Have you seen Gramp?"

"No," the patrolman answered, puzzled, "what—"

"He's gone. Disappeared. Someone must have carried him away. He was stiff as a corpse."

"That's impossible," the patrolman said. "I've been cruising your wall for two hours. Nobody went in or out."

The word spread rapidly down the hill to the waiting crowd. Within minutes the woods were full of searchers, shouting back and forth in the still morning air.

"They'll trample him," Alan muttered.

"Someone's got to find him," Irene said quietly.

"Maybe . . . down by the lake." For some reason the



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thought was crystal clear, but Alan didn't realize he had whispered it.

"What did you say?"

"The lake," Alan repeated, "you know, down below where he loved to sit and watch the water and the birds."

Gordon looked at him strangely.

"You need some rest, Doc, that's almost a half mile."

"He got out of the cottage and over the wall," Alan said. "Can you think of a better place to look?"

Without waiting for an answer, he hurried around the brick enclosure and down the steep path Gramp had followed often in past years.

He slipped and fell once on the greasy clay. But there were no tracks in the mud before him. Gordon and Irene followed slowly behind.

A finger of the artificial lake had crept back in a narrow valley, the slopes too precipitous to support tourist cabins. Through the trees, Alan caught sight of the limestone outcropping that formed a small cliff over the water.

Something else gleamed white in the rising sun.

He ran down the steep path, lost his footing and scrambled out on the rock ledge on hands and knees.

"Morning, Doc," Gramp said. "Nice day after the rain."

Stunned by the incongruity of the old man squatting there, the white hospital gown wrapped around his bony knees, Alan collapsed panting on the rock.

Humming a quiet tune, Gramp skimmed a flat stone over the still water and watched it dance briefly before sinking.

"How—" Alan tried to shake the question loose from his parched throat. "How did you get down here?"

Behind it were a thousand questions. How did you live? Why didn't you die? Where were your tracks on the path?

"Don't exactly know, yet," Gramp said slowly, "but it's comin' to a focus pretty fast. "I woke up and you were asleep. It was startin' to get light and the air smelled so good, I just wished to be here. And I was here."

"You wished?" Alan stared in disbelief.

"That's it. I wished."

Gordon and Irene came out of the woods. Alan motioned them to silence. His heart thumped heavily in his chest.

Gramp stretched lazily and sprawled out in the sun, an arm under his head.



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"Don't lie on the cold rock," Irene said sharply. "You'll catch cold."

Gramp gazed at her calmly. "I don't think I'll catch anything anymore," he said simply. "All the time I was there in bed, something was going on in my head, like a lot of little diamonds clicking around to make a big one. I knew what was goin' on, even with my eyes shut. I saw you and I saw the Krishna and I saw the gun. I wished the bullet wouldn't hit me, and it didn't."

"What else can you wish?" Alan asked huskily.

"Most anything. Right now I can see inside that Mrs. Bradenburg, in jail down in Jeff City." Gramp's eyes seemed focused on something far away. "She doped the flour, too, you know. Her heart's not so good. I could nudge it ever so little and . . . but I won't."

"Do you—" Alan hesitated. "Do you know what happened?"

"Remember when you were 14, Doc, when every muscle and bone in your body was bustin' with growing up? That's the way it was in my head. Now I feel grown up," Gramp said simply.

"Adolescence!" Alan whispered, so low Gramp couldn't have heard it. But the old man grasped the thought directly from his mind.

"That's it. You're all adolescents. Up till now, I guess, nobody lived long enough to grow up. Maybe in the next hundred years I can help some others."

A red squirrel crawled out on a branch over their heads, chattering to scold them out of his woods.

Gramp pointed a finger and said "Bang!"

The squirrel toppled end for end out of the tree. It was dead before it struck the rock.

"Poor little feller," Gramp said. "I shouldn't've killed him, but ever since I was a kid I wished I could do that.

"Guess I'll have to watch myself from now on."

**THE END**

**ON SALE JANUARY 15th IN FANTASTIC**

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# The Fifth Stone

By ALFRED COPPEL

*What lay behind this family of accident prones? Was it something in the blood? Generation after generation falling into the same trap. John Marsh had to find out and there was only one way—join the family!*

THE man who had died once and would die again and still live, lay on the hospital cot. Blood and saline oozed from the racked jars and flowed through a tangle of plastic tubes into his veins. The electrocardiograph recorded a failing heart action. A sphygmograph needle traced the weakening pulse.

John Marsh had only minutes of life left to him and Calder, the therapist from BuPsych, watched the splintered wreckage on the cot with compassion. No matter what Marsh had done, he was dying a horrible death for it, his face and body bloated and torn from internal pressures, his tendons and muscles ripped from broken bones, his flesh burned and frozen and tinted blueblack by his own ruptured blood vessels. An unprotected man in space goes through hell before he dies.

The Spaceforce line officer, a captain with silver lightnings on the peak of his cap and a delta-winged rocket on his breast, frowned at the medic who stood apart in the far corner of the room.

The medic shook his head. "I'm sorry. He's dying and there's nothing more we can do about it."

The captain held his clenched fists against the seam of his trousers. His knuckles were white. When he spoke there was hopeless fury in his voice. "I only wish I could kill him with my own hands."

The words hung in the humming stillness. In the corridor could be heard the



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measured pacing of the double guard. Beyond the barred windows a meteor streaked across the starfields. Another.

"He won't last the night," Calder said. Because his training was emphatic, he could *feel* Marsh dying.

"We've been damned lucky to keep him alive this long," the medic said, "Staff has done a job on him." He was thinking that no one really appreciated just how good a job had been needed to keep John Marsh alive even for an hour, let alone two days. He looked at Calder and the captain from under lowered brows. The damned brasshat only wanted Marsh alive so he could be killed legally. Well, that was his business and in a way it was too bad he wasn't going to get his way. Certainly Marsh deserved the worst. But a higher authority was taking it out of the captain's hands and he was going to have to be satisfied with what Marsh had already suffered. Calder, now, was different. The BuPsych man looked as though he had his teeth into something. The way he handled those tapes and wires—like they were pure gold. It was chilling the way BuPsych people could *get inside* and actually *be* someone. That damned empathic training. Perhaps that was why they all seemed so vague and blank when they weren't working. To be really empathic, you couldn't have any real personality of your own to get in the way.

The medic sighed and turned back to his death watch, awaiting the last minutes.

Calder began collecting his equipment. The recorder, the tapes, the subvocal micropickups.

"Will you be able to make anything out of all that?" the captain asked. "I couldn't hear a goddam thing."

"Those things are so sensitive they can almost seem to pick up thoughts," Calder said. "Not really, of course. But if there's enough life left in a subject for any sort of subvocalization, they'll tape it."

The captain's long face seemed carved from polished bone. Only his eyes were alive, and they were burning. "How soon will you have it all transcribed?"

"It'll take some time," Calder said. "It's like doing an analysis. Only I have to be both the therapist and the analysand. You can't rush it."

"The court of inquiry convenes at 0800 hours tomorrow. Be prepared to make



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your presentation then," the captain said curtly.

Calder suppressed an unmilitary protest. There were documents to examine, and records. Then the tapes. He would have to actually *become* Marsh and live the crucial periods of his life. It could be done in a night, with the help of stay-awake pills. But his effectiveness would be impaired and so would his defenses against total transference.

"I could use more time, sir," Calder said.

"The court is at 0800 hours."

"Yes, sir."

The captain's bone-gray face showed his inner tension. "We have to know why. That's what's important. Why, and how to prevent it happening again."

"This isn't the first time, is it?" Calder asked, fishing.

"Has there been a breach of security, Mister Calder?" The captain spoke in a harsh, flat voice.

"Rumors, sir. And a classmate of mine was on the Wheel two years ago."

The captain walked slowly across the room to look down into the shattered face. "Another one of Timur Denby's sons. In spite of everything we did to keep them down. Damn them all!" His face grew livid with hate and the medic tensed, watching.

Quite abruptly, the captain straightened and walked swiftly from the room. Calder heard the clash of metal as the guards saluted and then the sound of steel-shod footsteps echoing down the corridor.

The medic let his breath out with a sigh. "He wasn't kidding, was he?"

Calder shook his head slowly.

"What was that Denby business?"

"David Denby. That's his name. John Marsh is an alias."

The medic studied the figure on the cot. "*The* Timur Denby's son?"

"The youngest," Calder said, locking his instrument case.

"I'll be damned. A First Lander's brat. It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"I thought the captain was really going to do what he said. With his bare hands."

"Most spacemen would feel the same way."

"They're giving out it was an accident, I suppose."

"That's probably what they'll say."



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The medic shook his head disbelievingly. "A First Lander's kid—" He glanced at Calder. "Was he—you know—crazy?"

Calder frowned at the use of what his elementary psych instructors would have called a polarized word.

"I mean," the medic said, "five hundred people. And his own crew. Well—"

"And New Providence," Calder said. "It was more than mass murder. It was—" He shrugged. "Is there a word for it?"

The medic watched the flickering pulse of the sphygmograph needle. It flickered once. Twice. Again. And was still.

"If there is a word," he said, "he'll never hear it. He's finally gone."

Calder picked up his recorder. He had the curious feeling of being custodian of a man's soul. All that was left of David Denby, alias Captain John Marsh, was on Calder's tapes.

He watched the medic cover the dead face before he turned and quietly left the room.

The old-fashioned study lamp cast a pool of light on the desktop. The files and related documents had been examined, but only part of the mystery was dispelled.

His name was David Denby, and he was born in the industrial slums of the Mars Colony, New Providence. He grew up there, the youngest of five brothers: Isaiah, Mark, Charles, Dennison, and David. Father: Timur Denby, crewman of the *Hound of Heaven*, the first ship to arrive safely on Mars. Mother: unknown, presumed dead. So the files read.

Like all his brothers, David went into space as a racketman. For a Marschild there were only two choices. The space service or work in the huge industrial complexes of New Providence. He rose from jetman to section officer to astrogator, and finally to second pilot.

There the trail marked David Denby ended.

A year later, a second pilot of Martian colonial origin obtained command of the *Roc*, a fairish chemical rocket of 500 tons thrust. The man's name was John Marsh.

That much you knew from the trail of forms and records any man leaves behind him. Even a new identity can be uncovered and attached to a man's history. No problem for CIA and Spaceforce Intelligence. No problem at all,



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Calder thought wryly, *after the fact.*

Item. Denby became Marsh —took two weeks and a day from the time that Charles Denby's ship, *Cygnus,* exploded a hundred miles from the Wheel on a routine flight from Mars.

There was a pattern too obvious to miss. Isaiah and Mark lost in the *Goddard.* Charles in *Cygnus,* Dennison in the *Stella Polaris.* And now David Denby in the *Roc.*

Spaceflight was hazardous, yes. But not that hazardous. Atomics were still in the future, perhaps a hundred years in the future for spaceships. Venus was an impenetrable formaldehyde desert, the Outer Planets methane glaciers. Only Mars could be exploited for needed ores. Uranium, iron, tungsten, platinum, palladium, everything the home world needed. So flight into space was a regulated, almost routine thing. Barring accidents.

But five accidents in the same family? What was it that line captain had said? "Another one of Timur Denby's sons. In spite of everything we did to keep them down."

Calder rubbed his chin with the back of his hand and cursed his job. This was like trying to restore a portrait out of scattered flecks of paint. A ravaged near-corpse picked up in space. Personal effects. A book of old poems amidst the spinning, orbiting debris of the *Roc.* And old man's blindness. Timur Denby had lost his sight in a hydrazine explosion and had never returned to Earth with the *Hound.* Was that significant, Calder wondered? What had the old man done those two years alone on Mars while the *Hound* returned home to the Wheel to report Mars ready for the taking?

Calder had never been to Mars, but he had seen the antiquities a few of the spacemen brought home with them. The jade carvings, the fragmented mosaics, the delicately alien figurines. All created by the race vanished a million years before men left their caves.

He suppressed a shiver. What had two years alone with that incredibly ancient past done to Timur Denby and the woman crew member who presumably remained with him to bear his sons?

Somehow it must all be woven together into a pattern acceptable to eleven stone-faced officers of a court of inquiry. Because in some way it



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led to David Denby's vicious, wantonly destructive, treasonable crime.

He opened the thin volume of poems. It was an old book, very old. But of terrestrial origin. He smiled at that thought. Had he expected it to be some sort of Rosetta Stone for the undeciphered ancient Martian glyphs? Who would be interested in this era of ruthless expansion anyway? Empathy again. Already he was beginning to feel like one of Timur Denby's sons.

Some of the pages were heavily underscored. The lines were drawn with a modern stylus, so it must have been David and not Timur who chose the lines to emphasize. He began to read slowly.

*Oh bless your blindness, glory in your groping—*

People didn't write like that any more; the line had a quality of exaltation that was missing from modern life.

He read on until he came to another underscored line.

*Sling your fifth stone, oh son of mine, and win—*

Calder closed the book, holding the place with his fingers. The fifth stone. He opened the book once more and reread the line.

He had the feeling of looking without seeing, of knowing without understanding. The line was obviously opposite.

He stood up and lit a cigarette thoughtfully. He looked at the recorder. He was avoiding it because the key to the puzzle was so tantalizingly *there.*

He was almost afraid to be David Denby for the space of an hour.

He dropped his cigarette, half-smoked, into the disposal slot and forced himself to sit down again.

Time was getting short.

He sighed and reached for the switch. The plastic tape began to run from one spool to another.

He snapped off the desk lamp and the square of the window came alive with stars. The skyglow from the shops and working areas of Mojave couldn't dim the brilliance of the moonless desert night. He watched the meteor-fragments fall and burn, fall and burn. Someone had estimated it would be eight months before the last of the debris stopped falling.

He leaned back in his chair and began the pre-empathic relaxing exercises. The recorder hummed hypnotically in the darkened room.

Through the background



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noises picked up by the supersensitive instrument — the sighing of breath into lacerate lungs, the whisper of sluggish, cooling blood flowing through veins and arteries, the incipient cannibalistic feast-noises of self-degestion that accompany dying—he could hear David Denby communicating.

The sprawling complex of the great, useless spaceport beyond the walls of his room faded into unreality as the transference began.

A thousand years earlier men would have said he was being possessed. He would have crouched in a pentagram and the smoke of incense would have filled the air in his room.

Now it was only the hum of the recorder as the dead mind of David Denby crept into his.

And then he *was* David Denby, going home to Mars.

I was on the Wheel when they told me about Dennison. They didn't know I was his brother, of course, or they would never have said anything at all to me. They would have just taken the *Roc* away and given her to someone else.

There was even talk about some of the crews meeting in New Providence and lynching the old man. They knew that somehow he was behind it all.

In a way, I felt the same as the rest of them did. Yes, Timur was my father and I was the missing fifth son everyone was ready to fear, but I have been a spaceman all my life and I felt as the rest did that what my brothers did was worse than murder. I didn't know then what it was they were *trying* to do. If I had, I might have been ready to kill Timur with my own hands.

On the outward flight to Mars, my crew talked of nothing else but Dennison and the *Stella Polaris*. It happened only two hundred miles from the Wheel and the ship had been locked on radar control so everyone saw the blowup. There were no survivors. No, no one could *prove* Dennison was responsible, but the word Denby was the same as Jonah by this time.

And so I found myself going home. Someone, I forget now who it was, had seen Timur on his last trip to New Providence, and the rumor was that he was dying.

Among spacemen, that was a happy rumor.

I had to see for myself. I thought then that it was only this that drew me back to the stinking hovel where I was



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born, amid the slagheaps and the filthy industrial rubble of the Old City.

We lived close to the alien legends in the Old City. My father had lived there alone with my mother long before New Providence was built. He was blinded by an explosion and couldn't return on the first ship, the *Hound*. My mother—I never knew her, she died when I was born—stayed with him. She was a technician for the original expedition and Timur must have been a handsome man because she stayed with him in spite of his blindness—or maybe because of it. I don't know. As I say, I never knew her, but she would have had to be a remarkable woman to face two years alone on Mars with only a blind man for companion. By the time I was born, the Old City was a rubbish heap. But I remember that my brother Mark, who was my favorite, used to tell me that he remembered it differently. All I know is that my earliest memories are of filth, privation, and hostility from our neighbors.

I've said we lived close to the old legends. We all did. But even so, our family was set apart. I think it was those two years Timur and my mother spent alone on the planet before the second expedition landed. People said Timur had learned things no man should learn and that he had become something *different*.

I used to lie awake on my narrow bed and listen to the music coming from the bars and honkytonks across the canal and I'd wish with all my heart that I were a real Earthman and that some day I could go home. At that time I thought of Earth, the Earth I had never seen, as my home.

Timur's old shipmates used to come across to the Old City —Dumptown, they called it— for a visit with my father whenever their ships landed at the spaceport on the other side of New Providence. I'd sit and listen to them talk about home, about the oceans I'd never seen, about skies that were pale blue and not dark at midday, about trees and green grass and great teeming cities full of aircraft. I was about ten then, and Earth was my fairyland.

But Timur would only scowl and nibble on the bitter lichens he liked so well and pretty soon the old shipmates would feel uncomfortable, as though they were in the presence of an alien of some kind, and they would leave.



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The kindest of them would say to me, "Your old man's gone native, Davy. He's a regular Marski now." Which was supposed to be funny because the Martians had all died millions of years ago and left only the old ruins.

It was when Isaiah left home to sign as able spaceman on the *Centaur* that I realized for the first time that Timur hated Earth.

Before Isaiah left, Timur took him away into the hills, toward the crumbled ruins on the edge of Solis Lacus. They spent what seemed to me a long time there, and when my brother returned, he was *different.* I mean that. His face was the same and he walked and talked the same way, but he was suddenly apart from Mark and Charles and Denny and me. He was *with* Timur. And deep down inside I could feel that both of them had shared something the rest of us knew nothing about.

I was only thirteen then, around eight by Martian count, and I could have been mistaken.

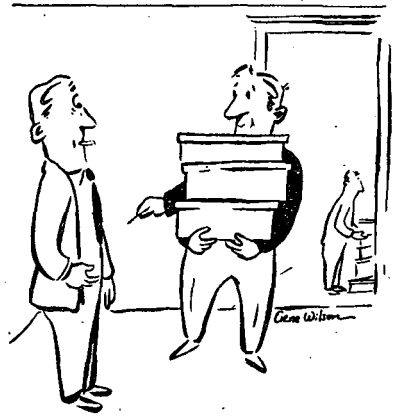
But when it came Mark's turn to go. I knew it was no mistake. Mark changed, too, after that visit to the hills. And after he had gone, I began to grow afraid.

All my brothers left in their turn. Isaiah was lost on the *Goddard,* together with Mark. Mark signed on the *Goddard* because he wanted to be with his brother, and so both of them died.

Then Charles left, and finally Dennison, and I found myself alone with Timur.

By this time, his old shipmates had all either died or stopped making the trek across the canal to Dumptown. The children of the mine and smelter workers who lived near us hated me because I was the son of a First Lander and therefore a kind of dirt poor aristocrat aand at the same time I was Timur's son, and Timur was queer, crazy, blind, and he hated Earth.

I didn't hate Earth. The music room from across the canal, the neon lights burning



"Yes, I have a match!"



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at night, the tinsel and excitement of New Providence, symbolized for me all that was wonderful and exciting.

What I did hate was our grinding poverty, and the sight of my father's milk-white eyes, and having to read to him from the old books he and mother had brought from Earth, and most of all I hated the prospect of my initiation trip into the hills that was surely coming.

I was afraid of the old ruins. I think now that I was afraid of old Timur, too. Not that he was cruel to me. Only that he was so different from everyone else. And at sixteen the last thing I wanted was to be different—like that.

Perhaps this is hindsight, but it seems to me now that I was always conscious of a *presence* around Timur. And when my brothers came back from the ruins, it was the same with them. I feared that more than anything else. It made me long for the hell-raising, wanton gaiety of New Providence and more important, the planet New Providence belonged to.

The Old City was part of Mars somehow, built on the remains of the ancient Martian town. New Providence, with its factories and mines and theatres and ginmills and the rowdy men from the industries and the spaceport—that was Earth.

And so, two weeks before by eighteenth birthday, I ran away.

The Old City school wasn't so bad that I couldn't work my way into a technical job in New Providence. And from there, I followed my brothers into the space service.

It was an unkindness, leaving a blind old man. I knew it. But a combination of fear and desire for things terrestrial combined to give me the power to rationalize my actions.

I seldom went back. And when I did, I hated it, and Timur was constrained with me. I gave him money, as Charles and Dennison did, but he lived in the same way as he always had. As though physical discomforts affected him not at all. He refused to move out of Dumptown.

Then Charles was lost in the *Cygnus*, and the name Denby was becoming famous again. For all the wrong reasons.

I was in line for a command of my own and the owners of the ship told me that no crew would fly with a Captain named Denby.



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So I became John Marsh.

But I was still Timur's son, and when Dennison died and I was the only one left, I resolved to go and see my father.

That's how I returned home to Mars. I had to discover Timur's influence.

The years had taught me something. I no longer loved the bustle of New Providence or, for that matter, of London, or Mojave, or New York.

The child's illusions are the man's disappointments and I had had my full share.

There had been a marriage in Los-Angeles. It lasted two trips. I wasn't an Earthman. I was a colonial Martian and the differences were too much to adjust. We parted bitter friends.

The cities of Earth were crowded, noisy, frenetic. The blue sky was there, but it had to be seen from a rising Wheel taxi or a high mountain because of the pall of smog and grime. The people were confused, rapacious, and ambitious. For what, I could never understand. For *more*, perhaps. But as I say, I was a colonial. There are things I do not value.

It may be that in the back of my mind was the hope that returning to the place of my birth would give me something to believe in.

The Old City had not changed. It was still a wretched rash of hovels, a festering hole on the dry face of Mars. The shanties were built right down to the highwater mark on the canal bank, and the whole area stank of industrial refuse.

I walked through the narrow streets followed by a band of ragged urchins who stared at my uniform and occasionally darted up to beg for a few coins. This was a thing unique to colonial Mars. The poor of Earth didn't beg. No one would have listened to them.

The house, if you can call it that, where I was born, was on the far outskirts of Dumptown. I saw it again with mixed emotions.

I had hated this place as a child, but now, as a man, I hated it more because I had been abroad and I knew there was no place really very different. The hopelessness of that made my feelings venomous.

There was a boy with Timur in the shanty when I stepped through the half-open door. The boy looked at my uniform with hungry eyes and then ran, scuttling through the door without



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touching me and vanishing amid the slagheaps. Some unwanted brat dropped by one of the women from across the canal and brought to Dumptown to be sold. Timur must have taken him as a substitute pair of eyes. It could have been worse. In many cases it was. Vice was a principal industry in the Old City.

There was an animal smell in the cold room. My father sat in his ancient chair near the open window, listening to the distant roar of Bessemer steel converters across the canal.

I thought of my four brothers, and of our name being synonymous everywhere in space with murder and sabotage. And this made me speak without compassion, even though I could see that Timur was very old and obviously failing.

"Timur—" For some reason I could not call him "father." "Timur," I said. "Dennison is dead."

The blind eyes turned toward me and I shuddered. The ravaged face was terrible to see. He sighed and the sound was like the long-remembered whispering of the marswind. I was, for an instant, a child again and lying on my pallet in this very room and listening to the voice of Mars drifting on the cold wind from the north.

"Did you hear me? I said Dennison is dead."

"I heard," he said.

I could sense it already, that differentness, that feeling of alien presence.

"They say he wrecked his own ship," I said bitterly.

"I know," Timur said. "Is that why you have come back? You ran away before I could teach you. I had four sons and they are all gone now."

I hated him suddenly, the stink of him, and the calm way he disowned me, and above all I hated the gray memories that bound me to him and to my four dead brothers, memories that would not let me turn away now and accept his disownment.

"Answer me," he said slowly. "Have you come back because Dennison is dead and now there's only you?"

It seemed that senility had claimed him at last as he answered his own question in a rasping voice.

"Yes, you've come back."

He rustled drily, searching for me with his hands. "Welcome home, son," he said.

His touch revolted me. It was the touch of something



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out of my childhood. The fear of the ancient past, of the ruined temples, of the masks and carvings.

God, I thought, how I despise this place. The oily smell of it, the gritty taste of mines and smelters and the red-black soot of collieries and the darkness of burrows shored with timbers looted from ruins as old as time. I despise the heavy smoke in air that's too thin to support it, and the crummy shacks of mineworkers and steelworkers, the trapped poverty of it. I hate the marred, scarred face of the whole miserable dead and should be buried planet—

Earth was bad enough. But *this*. It was as though I were seeing Mars for the first time and it was hideous.

"Dennison," the old man said in a whisper. "Oh, I had hopes for Dennison— He must have tried very hard."

I stared at him unbelieving.

"But now you've come back."

My mind recoiled from what I had been thinking. It was too grotesque and too senseless.

I looked around me at the books piled everywhere and covered with reddish dust. At the carvings and figurines salvaged from the sand-drifted temples. It suddenly occurred to me that the room's arrangement was, how can I put it, subtly unearthly. Arranged in a way no terrestrial would arrange it.

"I won't be here for long," I said violently. "Nothing could keep me in this God-forsaken place."

"You were born here," the old man said. "This is your home."

I laughed at that. "Home is where the heart is."

Outside the shanty it lay, this home of mine, under the blanket of a deepening night. The smoke obscured the stars, and from the ground beneath us came the rumblings of drilling and blasting. Across the silted canal the lights of New Providence—those lights that had beckoned to me when I was a child, the city we terrestrials had built on the rubble of temples and unearthly castles. The ginmills were running full blast for the crew of my ship and the thin wind carried the shouts and rowdy laughter, the frontier-bordertown medley of cursing, brawling, catting noises. From the spaceport came the whine of turbines and the roar of jets being tested.

And I saw it all for what it was: the wanton rape of a world.



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Presently, Timur spoke. "Is it ugly, son?"

"It's filthy," I said with feeling.

"It wasn't ugly when I first came here. I still see it the way it was."

This was the pioneer speaking, I thought sadly. The First Lander. I turned away from the door and sat down wearily on the bed. "I need a drink," I said.

Timur's blind eyes seemed to be looking inward. "I'm old, son. Too old now to take you to the temple in the hills. It's been years since I've been there. But if I could, if I could call them to me here—Oh, I could show you Mars as it was. As it should be."

I wondered at his turn of phrase. If I could call them here to me—

It started a strange train of thought in my mind. In a sense *they*, the Martians still did exist. They were memory, and fragments buried under tons of ferric sand, and the marswind mourning.

They existed for Timur as surely as I did. No, more surely than I did. He could see them with that inward-turning sight of the blind.

And I wondered what he had experienced during those two years alone with my mother, alone on this silent, ancient world.

A terrestrial had once said: I think, therefore I am. Couldn't *they* say: We are remembered, therefore we are? The ultimate application of the Berkleyan philosophy. The very endpoint of evolution. A kind of incorporeal immortality.

The idea opened up a frightening vista of a world populated by slumbering memories rudely awakened by the advent of invaders from space. What would these memorial beings desire? Peace. For eternity.

I shivered and rubbed my cold hands together.

The old man nodded. "It's in the blood," he said. "It's happening to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said roughly. "I'm going. Write to me if there is anything you want. I'll try and get it to you." I stood up.

"A favor, David, before you go." It was the first time he had called me by name.

"What is it?"

"You used to read to me. Before Mark died, and the others."

"I remember."

"Find the book and do it now."

And childhood memories



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possessed me again and I could not refuse him. It was all there in my mind, waiting to be recalled.

I went to the cluttered shelves and searched the dusty volumes there. I found it. A thin book, very old, by a woman named Stella. The golden letters of the last name had long ago flaked away. The place was even marked by a ribbon that crumbled at my touch. It had seen much use.

Timur followed my movements with that arcane sensitivity of the blind.

*"Oh bless your blindness,"* he quoted before I could begin, *"Oh bless your blindness, glory in your groping—"*

I glanced at him and saw his raddled old face transfigured.

I read the verse aloud and finished with the lines I best remembered.

*"Go forth, go forth, nor ask me what comes after; The fifth stone shall not fail you, son of mine—"*

I stood for a long moment, holding the book and trying to read the expression on my father's face. He seemed to be listening to voices I could not hear. Tears streaked his cheeks. "They've come," he said softly. "Thank God."

I thought, he's gone mad. He hears the ghosts of a race a million years vanished.

And then he began to speak, with a voice that was not his own. A voice so gently timbred, so delicately modulated, that I had the feeling my ears were not fine enough instruments to accept one-tenth of its immense expressiveness.

"Mars was not always as you see it now," the voice said. My father took my arm like one possessed. And I knew that I was listening to the voice of a race gone but not destroyed. "Let me show you Mars—"

And I saw it. I saw the world before the coming of men. I saw the red hills, slumbrous and old under a daylight sky full of stars. I walked under the two moons and watched the shifting shadows on the sand. I saw flying towers too delicate to stand on any planet's breast but this, towers and needle spires soaring like birds in flight. There were ice clouds glare white with sun against a sky the color of cobalt. There was music, intricate and stately rhythms and tones like crystals drifting on the marswind. The canals rippled in sunlight, the deep still water bluegreen at midday. And I



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was there and not dreaming, because I saw my own face in the mirror depths, and behind me fleeting glimpses of lacey figures dancing in woven robes of silver so thin it floated on the air, and the laughing faces hidden behind masks of beaten bronze. I touched the icy water. I stood on the ochre moss and the white rime lay on the ground and it crunched beneath my feet.

I thought wonderingly, this, then was the world Timur found during those two years, the world beyond the curtain of his blindness and the ravaging of time and progress. I could not think how it was done, nor did I care.

I watched the seasons turn and when summer came and the lichens turned to rusty crimson, the tides, deep and full, swelled the canals, and the moss turned green on the ancient ground, nourished by the clean, clear blood of the silent planet—

My inward vision faltered. I had not dreamed that Mars was like that once. It was as though the dreamer had touched the face of the dream and must weep. It was all there, everything I had ever longed for. The stars in a cupped hand.

"You saw," my father said. The voice was his own.

"Yes," I said. "Oh, God, yes."

"They still live, you see. In the hills, in the snowfields. Everywhere."

I sat down abruptly, because my legs were tired and trembling.

"What can we know of the evolution of an alien race?" he asked quietly. "What can we know about them at all?"

"That was what you showed my brothers," I said.

"Yes."

"That was what I ran away from."

"I'm sorry, David."

I sat silently, containing the ache of longing in my chest.

"Now look at your Mars," Timur said harshly.

And I saw the smoke again, and the ginmills, the filthy refuse. I felt myself crumbling inside. "I don't know. I don't know at all. It's our way—"

I broke off suddenly because I realized that it wasn't *our* way. It was *their* way. And once I knew that, I knew what it was I must do. What Dennison, and Mark, and the others had tried to do.

I slipped the book I still held in my hand into my



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pocket. I was the fifth stone.

"We will not meet again," Timur said sadly.

"No," I said.

"You've listened to them," my father said. "They will be with you always."

I walked out into the night. Across the water and the city I could see the wide winged shape of my ship being hoisted into take-off position.

Calder sat quite still in the darkness of his room. The recorder shut itself off.

Bits of the here-and-now impinged on his consciousness. The old man had flung five stones. No, not just the old man. *They* had done it. To get their world back.

Even that wasn't quite right. *They* and Timur and his five dead sons were one.

He felt himself stiffen with fright. He heard Timur telling David: They will be with you always."

Then they were here.

Here, he thought. With me. Now.

*No,* not *with* me. I am Timur Denby. I am David and all his brothers.

I am one of them.

Total transference. They had bridged the gulf.

But everything has a function, Calder thought. David completed his. What is mine?

In the sky he saw the rain of meteors that had been falling for two days, ever since Captain David Denby had rammed his ship into the space-station.

Not only had the men on the Wheel died, but New Providence would have to be abandoned, because although ships could fly from Mars to Earth, they could not fly from Earth to Mars without the Wheel.

What was Calder's function?

Guardian.

But of what, and how?

His eyes left the sky and caught the brilliantly lighted machine shops and construction sheds where already the long, long task of building another Wheel was underway.

He understood.

He would teach others.

The Mars colony was finished. Another Wheel would never be launched.

Calder looked back at the sky with longing. The red eye of Mars gleamed low on the horizon. He thought of the silent lichen-covered rocks and the deep cool waters of the canals with sadness.

For nothing is accomplished without sacrifice.

He would never go home.

**THE END**



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# TOOL OF THE GODS

By LAWRENCE CHANDLER

*A freak twist of fate made Wilson Crandall the most important man in the world. But good things don't last forever. Would Crandall be able to function again as an ordinary mortal?*

THEY had plundered a marble quarry to build the Xanadu that was Wilson Crandall's home. Yellow-veined *Lumachelle* from France stretched across his front hallway in neatly-butted squares. Columns of fine *Carrara* rose to exaggerated heights in his living room. He liked the ringing sound of marble beneath his feet, liked the smooth cool touch of it beneath his hand.

On his sixtieth birthday, the Eugenic Government presented him with a brace of marble statuary. One of the figures was of himself, and the sculptor had successfully chiselled his craggy face, his fine aquiline features, his tall, proud body with its muscular arms and chest.

The other figure was Woman. Its contours were molded with infinite softness. When placed in correct juxtaposition, its face was raised to Crandall's statue in supplicant adoration.

The presentation ceremonies were impressive as usual. A choral group of several hundred Crandall offspring sang their song of tribute. The President of the Eugenic Government unveiled the statues, to the oh's and ah's of ten thousand Crandall mothers and Crandall children.

But when the crowds had departed from the vast green acreage of his front lawn, Wilson Crandall was sad.

He placed a call to his good friend, Alfred Newman, who was one of the fourteen staff



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physicians assigned to his exclusive welfare.

Newman arrived right after dinner. He found Crandall sprawled wearily in a pneumatic armchair in the living room, sipping some fine Estonian brandy.

"Well," he said, striding across the marble floor. "This is a fine way to spend a birthday."

"I wanted to be alone," Crandall said. "But I've been thinking too much, brooding. I thought we would play a game of chess."

"Good idea," the doctor said, with strained enthusiasm. He was a ruddy-faced man with a fixed jolly expression, who had resisted the idea of hormones and pigmentation-pills, and allowed his seventy-five years to show on his lined face and in his sparse white hair.

Before one piece had been moved on the marble chessboard, Crandall said:

"I've been thinking about the statue, Alfred. It's not a very good likeness."

"Really? I thought it was excellent myself."

"Your eyes are failing. You and those ghouls of yours examined me last week. I don't have the body of a boy any longer. You know that."

"Well, a little artistic licence—"

"I'm sixty years old." Crandall picked up the ivory King and turned it in his fingers. "Let's face it, Alfred."

"That doesn't mean a thing these days, Wilson. You're in your prime. The last sperm count we made of you was excellent. There'll be forty-five to fifty thousand Crandall children born in the next four-month period . . ."

Crandall shrugged, and they began the game. They played silently, until Crandall cornered the doctor's Queen with an elaborate knight-bishop-pawn trap. Newman resigned with a laugh, saying:

"The all-powerful Queen. What would the game be worth without her?"

Crandall looked at him sharply, but the doctor's eyes were blank.

They sat in deep, understanding silence for a while, and then Crandall said:

"There's no hiding anything from you, you old fox. You know what's troubling me. It's that girl."

"You mean Celeste?"

"Of course I mean Celeste," Crandall grumbled. The sound of her name on his lips brought her golden image to his mind. Celeste, of the yellow streaming hair and the



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thin, pinched, lovely face. Celeste, whose cool young body was as distant and aloof as the marble statuary that now graced his living quarters. He struggled to erase her picture from his brain. It wasn't easy.

He had selected her for the signal honor of being the temporary mistress of Crandall. Selected her himself, instead of depending upon the offices of the snickering young government agent who called himself "Crandall's pimp" behind his back. He had seen her at one of the many Crandall ceremonies, in the silken white robe that signified her status as a virgin, not yet of an age to bear Crandall children. She had accepted his offer; indeed, she wasn't sure whether the choice was hers.

Celeste was only one of some thirty women who had shared Crandall's personal life. But of all the women who had walked these marble floors, she was the only one who walked in Crandall's mind as well.

"What's wrong with her?" the doctor said, lighting his pipe.

"Didn't you know? Haven't you guessed?"

"No."

Crandall frowned, and sipped at the brandy without tasting it.

"She spurns me, Doctor. Oh, not in some high-and-mighty way. She weeps when I approach her, weeps a salty lake. She sulks in her room all day—and bars the door at night."

Dr. Newman's eyebrows lifted. "Well. I suppose that could be vexing. However, you can always . . ." He made an idle movement with his fingers, signifying with a gesture the ease with which Crandall's appetite could be sated.

"You don't understand. I want this girl here. She means something to me, more than the others have. I've told her that. I've told her that she would be my last mate, that I would never abandon her. But she merely weeps."

The doctor cleared his throat.

"I know what you're thinking," Crandall said. "A foolish old man, infatuated with a seventeen-year-old child. Perhaps you're right, Doctor. But she denies me everything. Even her company." He rubbed his forehead. "Every morning, she hides in her room. Then, when the nurse comes to bring her meal, she finds that she's been sick, vomiting . . ." He looked up.



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"Perhaps she's ill. Could that be?"

"Nonsense. She passed a rigid physical." Doctor Newman pulled smoke into his mouth. "Vomiting, you said?"

"Yes. In the morning . . ."

The doctor chuckled. "Well, that's a familiar symptom. It may be, my dear Wilson, that you have brought still another Crandall child into the world."

Crandall put the glass down. "Impossible. I've never gone near the girl."

"Well, perhaps she'll let me talk to her. Women seem to trust doctors. They think we're insensitive machines. If they only knew."

He chuckled again, and reset the chessboard.

The next morning, Dr. Alfred Newman returned to Crandall's marble castle, and subjected the girl named Celeste to some simple medical tests.

When he was done, he patted the smooth cascade of yellow hair, and told the girl to take things easy.

Then he sought out Wilson Crandall.

He found him on the terrace in the east wing of his home, surveying the acres of garden that stretched out limitlessly to the horizon, where the morning sun was bright and strong. He placed his small medical suitcase on a chair, regarding Crandall's strong, rocky profile. Then he cleared his throat.

"Oh, it's you," Crandall said dreamily. "What brings you here so early?"

"I told you last night. I thought I'd look in on your little friend, see if she hadn't come down with some unpleasant bug."

"And?"

The doctor smiled. "Congratulations. You're going to be a father."

"Don't be funny. What's wrong with Celeste?"

Crandall turned to him, slowly. His face, etched against the white glare of the sun, was marble itself.

"That's not possible," he said in a whisper. "You know that's not possible. I told you. She has lived here like—like my own daughter. She has never been to the A1 clinic. She can't be pregnant. Not in this sterile world—"

"Wilson, you're not telling me the truth." Color came to the physician's face. "You can't be. Do you know what you're implying?"

"It's not possible!" Crandall shouted.

The doctor sat down, and his blue-lined hand went to his forehead.



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"Unless," he said, shaking his head. "Unless this curse is over. Unless the nightmare is done . . . and the world can be the same again . . ."

"No!" Crandall said. "I won't believe it. There hasn't been a natural birth in two generations. Only a handful of men—myself, Conover in England, those two Russians—"

"Yes, yes, I know. But it could happen! Perhaps it has happened." He stood up.

"Where are you going?" Crandall said.

"To talk to the girl. To find out—"

"Not without me!"

The nurse brought Celeste to them.

"Sit down, my dear," Newman told her.

She cast a frightened look at Crandall, and hid in the corner of an oversized chair.

"Listen, Celeste," the doctor said gently. "You know those little tests I made this morning?"

She nodded.

"Well, I have some news for you. You're going to be a mother. Do you understand me?"

She stared at him, vacantly.

"I know what you're thinking. You've been brought up to believe that you could bear only Crandall children. And I myself have believed that, always. The men of our world are sterile, except for the few who have been spared by Nature's mysterious ways. But it is possible—yes, very possible—that our troubles might end as suddenly and inexplicably as they began. That's why I must ask you a question, Celeste. A very important question."

Crandall leaned forward, and the girl caught his stony gaze and looked away.

"You must tell me," the doctor said. "You must tell me who the boy is."

Her head spun wildly, the golden hair swinging about her face. Her eyes widened, and looked at Crandall's craggy face in unconcealed terror.

"No!" she said.

"You mustn't be frightened," Crandall said, in a choked voice. "You know I have never harmed you, Celeste. You must answer the doctor's questions."

She looked at the floor, her hands clutching the sides of the chair, the knuckles bony and white.

"No," she whispered. "I can't tell you."

"It's not your *personal* problem," the doctor said in-



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tensely. "You must understand. It could mean a great deal—to know—"

She met his kindly eyes, and clung to them. Then her lips parted, and she answered.

"His name is Joel. Joel Harper."

Then she bowed her head, and wept in either shame or fright or relief.

Wilson Crandall spent the rest of the day alone. He strode up and down the marble passageways of his home, walking swiftly, as if to some destination. He climbed the staircases, his footsteps loud and hurried. He unlocked the glass-enclosed cabinets that held the delicate treasures which had once graced the museums of the nation. He toured the grounds, shaking off the bodyguards assigned to protecting him from the attacks of zealots who believed that no man should live like a god.

Then, as the sun began to descend in his west windows, he summoned a bald-domed servant named Graille, and whispered a command.

Graille departed swiftly. He was gone only an hour. When he returned, he was accompanied by a grim-faced Crandall bodyguard named Briggs, and they were flanking a slim youth with a pale frightened face and challenging eyes.

"Is this the boy?" Graille asked.

"I don't know. Is this Joel Harper?"

"Yes," the boy said defiantly. "What do you want?"

The bodyguard raised a hand, as if to punish the insolence. Crandall stopped him.

"Let's not do anything like that. I just want to talk to you, Joel."

"What for?"

Crandall forced himself to smile. "We have something in common, you and I." He waved his hand, and the two men left the room. "Let's sit down and talk."

The boy looked uncertain. Then he found a seat on the other side of the room, and sat down tensely.

"Tell me something," Crandall said. "Do you know a girl named Celeste?"

The boy's smooth face darkened. "Yes," he answered.

"And you like this girl?"

"You know I do!"

"And do you know what's become of her?"

"Yes!"

Crandall folded his hands in his lap. "I suppose you are very angry. I suppose you entertained some dangerous thoughts about me, when you



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heard about Celeste and myself. Is that true?"

"Maybe."

The older man smiled. "Then I want to put your mind at rest. Your Celeste has lived here with me under the same conditions as my own daughter might . . ."

The boy's lip curled. "She is your daughter."

"Of course. Just as you are my son. Now tell me the truth. Should there be such animosity between a father and a son?" His tone was anything but paternal.

The boy stood up, squaring his shoulder.

"It's not that simple. You're not really my father. You're only a biological freak—"

Crandall's face grew bleak. "You're wrong, you know. The world is the freak. I am normal."

"Where's Celeste?"

"Would you like to see her?"

He slumped back to the chair. "No," he said wearily. "Not now."

Crandall leaned back and regarded the boy. He studied his face, searching for resemblance to himself. But as always, he could not find, could never seem to find his own youth in the faces of the children his sperm produced. It was like a penalty . . .

"I want to tell you something, Joel. I've changed my mind about Celeste. She's spoken to me about you, and I cannot, in all conscience, stand in her way."

The boy looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm letting her go. Back to you, if that's her wish. Will you feel better about me now?"

"Gosh, Mr. Crandall. Of course. I mean—I never really thought—"

Crandall chuckled. "Yes, I know. You never thought I was really a monster. But let's erase all hard feelings, son. Tonight." He got up and walked to the wall. His finger stabbed a button.

Graille appeared, his bald head shining, his eyes hooded.

"Yes, sir?" he said.

"I think now," Crandall smiled.

Graille came towards the boy.

"What are you going to do?" Joel said.

Crandall's smile broadened.

"Erase all hard feelings," he said.

Graille's hand closed over the boy's mouth before he could shout. Crandall turned his eyes away.

"Wait!"



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It was Newman, the doctor whose movements in and out of the Crandall home were never questioned by the guards. He walked rapidly towards them, and Graille, surprised, released his hold on the youth.

"What do you want?" Crandall said ominously. "Why do you bother me now?"

"Leave the boy alone." The doctor's face was pained.

"It's not your business, Doctor."

"It is! Because you're making a mistake—"

Crandall's face was stormy. "I am Crandall."

"That doesn't give you the right—"

"Graille!"

"No, wait!" Newman cried. "You don't know the truth, Wilson. You don't know the facts—"

"What facts?"

"About him. About the boy."

"What about him?"

"He's no threat to you, Crandall. In no way is he a threat."

"You're lying!"

"I'm telling you the truth! I found him before your thugs did! I examined him—"

"What?"

"Do you think I would lose a minute? If there was any hope that the world could be normal again? No, Wilson. I searched him out, and brought him to the laboratory. That's why I know. He's no threat, Crandall." The doctor's shoulders slumped. "He's sterile. Like the rest of us . . ."

"Then the girl lied!" Crandall thundered. "It's someone else!"

"No. The girl told the truth!"

"Then how? How could it be possible?"

The doctor sat down, and the soles of his shoes scuffed the marble tile beneath his feet.

"Nature has found another answer," he said softly. "Another way . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Spontaneous conception. Childbirth without fatherhood. Celeste is only the first, Crandall. There will be others . . ."

Crandall stared at him, and his roar of defiance resounded through the corridors of his home.

He stomped from the room, and hurried up the curving staircase to the second floor.

His hands struck the doors of Celeste's quarters with violence.

She was sitting near the window, with folds of cloth in



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her lap. There was a needle in her hand, and it was darting swiftly in and out of the fabric.

"Oh!" she said. "You frightened me."

He stood there, gaping at her.

"I—I was just doing a little sewing," she said shyly. "I thought I would surprise you, with some curtains for the window. This room is so cold. All this marble . . ." She shuddered.

Then she rose from her chair, smiling for the first time since she had entered his home. She gathered the material in her hands and brought it to the marble-framed window overlooking the gardens. She held her work up to open air, a delicate thing of frills and ruffles.

"There," she said contentedly. "Won't that make it nicer?"

"Yes," Wilson Crandall said, moving as if in a dream.

A breeze came through the window, and the curtain flapped in the girl's hand, like a triumphant banner.

But Crandall's mind was elsewhere. *So nature is discarding me,* he thought. *Crandall—unemployed.* He smiled in contentment.

**THE END**


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# PROGRESS ZERO

By G. L. VANDENBURG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

*There are some who maintain we are all part of a Great Plan that was blue-printed even before the beginning of time. Then what would happen if Man were to throw the Master Mechanism out of line?*

IN THE Valley of Infinity he had no name. His designation was The First Keeper of The Chronicle. But throughout the Universe he had many names. He chose the names himself and used them individually according to his assignment. On the planet Earth, or Planet 3981275 as it was known in Infinite circles, he called himself Kronosiris.

The prodigious book he carried bore no title. It was known simply as The Great Book. Its total contents were known to no being, for The Great Book was without beginning and without end.

He had just returned from Planet 107, a large body on the edge of Galaxy 49 and one of the oldest Plans of the Council of Creation. He would enjoy but a moment's rest in the Valley of Infinity before embarking upon his next journey. One eonic moment in Time in order to browse through the pages of The Great Book and familiarize himself with the billions of details of his new assignment.

He never ceased to marvel at the miraculousness of the Council of Creation. It had created how many Plans? Billions? The figure was beyond mental, even spiritual comprehension. And each Plan always progressed according to design. Never a failure. Not once, since he became First Keeper of The Chronicle had the sequence of events in any given Plan failed to comply with the outline of the same events in The Great Book.

His next journey promised



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to be exciting. He derived particular enjoyment from his duties on the younger Planets and of these Planet 3981275 was the youngest. He regretted that his visits to these places were all too infrequent. But such was the enormity of his job, which took him throughout the Universe, that he could not afford more than a few moments in any one place, be it old or young.

This gave him pause to wonder sometimes just why the Council of Creation could not alleviate his extraordinary burden. It was quite enough, he told himself, to keep track of all creation. But it was rather generally known that the Universe was expanding and eventually that would mean more work, a heavier schedule. But then the Council's decisions were never questioned any more than their countless Plans were ever deviated from.

His thoughts returned to Planet 3981275. He had made his last appearance there during the fiftieth year of Nostradamus. The great French astronomer and physician was his contact during that visit. Nostradamus, as he remembered, had been a most engaging and provocative companion. He had made Kronosiris' trip an unusually pleasant affair.

It seemed like only a few eons had passed since that summer day when he materialized in the Frenchman's garden and began their long accounting of the events in The Great Book. Actually, one hundred and fifty thousand revolutions of the Earth had been completed since then. It amused him that that was almost an eternity by Earth's standards.

He skimmed through The Great Book recalling the specific details of his meeting with Nostradamus. They had covered a multitude of events beginning with the Hegira of Mohammed and including The Magna Carta, The Crusades, Copernicus' Heliocentricity of the Solar System theory, The Divine Comedy, Joan of Arc and the imminent birth of Galileo. They had touched finally on the Renaissance and Kronosiris remembered telling the Frenchman of the lasting effect it would have on art and artists for hundreds of years to come.

With his memories warmed and a feeling of great expectation penetrating his whole being Kronosiris closed The Great Book. He began to concentrate in preparation for his journey. His mind's eye con-



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jured up an image of the individual who would serve the same function so graciously performed by Nostradamus four centuries before.

The image was of a tall man, well but not carefully dressed, a great mane of silver hair, gentle penetrating eyes, a kind and cheerful smile. And yet there was something basically wrong with the image, something momentarily indefinable that told Kronosiris the image was anachronistic to the Earth year 1964.

Doctor Wilfred Starling stood on the patio of the famous two-story home in Arlington overlooking the banks of the Potomac. He lit his pipe and stretched out on the chaise lounge. Relaxation in any form was a rare pleasure for the celebrated astro-physicist and philosopher. He hadn't enjoyed anything resembling a day off in twenty years.

His theories, his discoveries, his preachings, all stressing the divine oneness of Man and God, had succeeded in bringing the world at least as far as the threshold of peace. Not that war was no longer possible. It was simply not the inevitability it once was.

Wilfred Starling's long and tireless devotion to the betterment of mankind had taken an enormous toll on his mental stamina. Yet he remained, in his sixty-third year, a doggedly inspired and dedicated human being. His working day still consisted of eighteen hours, every minute of which was channeled toward the enlightenment of his fellow man.

But today was different. He could relax on this sunny spring afternoon, his head clear of all the world's remaining problems. He could sit back and wonder anew at all the unsolved mysteries of the Universe. And he could pray that a few of those mysteries might be answered by the visitor he was expecting.

The telepathic instructions had come to him in his study the night before. They fully oriented him as to the time and purpose of the visit. And he had no trouble accepting such mental thought projection. The voice had been clear and precise, if somewhat formal. He had no trouble accepting because he believed, as any devout man would, that he was in communication with God.

In the next moment Kronosiris was standing before him, a formidable-looking figure in his glistening gray robes. The Great Book rested under his arm.



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Doctor Starling spent a few moments looking at him in breathless awe. Then he rose from the chaise lounge and extended his hand.

"You are . . ." the doctor had difficulty with the next word.

"No," said the visitor, declining the doctor's hand, "not who you think I am. You may call me Kronosiris."

Doctor Starling took an awe-inspired step backward. A handshake was obviously impossible. His guest was a reality but not a very solid one.

"Please sit down, Doctor."

The doctor resumed his position on the lounge.

Kronosiris watched with a curious frown on his celestial brow. He still did not know what it was that seemed out of the ordinary about Doctor Starling.

"You understand the instructions?"

"Completely," Starling answered. "I must confess I have not been able to contain myself since last night. To receive a visit from . . . well, it's extraordinary! I mean we here on Earth seem possessed of so many preconceived notions of creation. Perhaps I should say we have a tendency to seek easy solutions to that which we judge to be incomprehensible."

"I understand," said Kronosiris. "What you speak of is quite common among the younger planets. The degree of naivete in your attitude has always mystified me."

"Mystified . . ." the doctor was perplexed. "How can you possibly be mystified . . . if everything is according to Plan. . . ?"

"You interpreted my revelations to you quite literally. The mind is an entity formed, according to Plan, in a state of absolute freedom. If it is ever controlled it is controlled by other minds, never by the Council of Creation."

"Then war and disease are products of man and therefore not a part of the Plan?"

"Not quite. You see, the mind is also formed in a state of imperfection. It is therefore known when the Plan is implemented, that war and disease and millions of other flaws are inevitable. Eventually the mind will utilize the full power of its freedom to eradicate these imperfections. You yourself have been working toward that goal, Doctor."

"I wonder then, could you tell me, Kronosiris. . . ." the doctor paused, ". . . what it is like . . . that is, what happens . . . ?"



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The visitor laughed. "What is death like, is that what you are asking?"

The doctor felt somewhat childish. "Well . . . yes."

"Another very prevalent question on the younger planets," said Kronosiris. "Do you remember what it felt like being born?"

"No."

"You will not remember what it feels like to die either. Does that answer your question?"

"I think so."

"Now, if you will forgive me for halting our digression, Doctor, we do have a great amount of work to do. We'll have later opportunities for our random thoughts. There are several ways we can accomplish the purpose of our meeting," said Kronosiris, opening The Great Book. "Here in the Book we will find everything faithfully recorded as a point of reference. Frankly, I prefer to memorize all the events and then simply listen to my host account for them. I then check my findings later against those in the Book."

"Aren't you concerned that you may make a mistake?"

"Impossible. My memory is perfect. And the Book has never contained a mistake. Are you ready, Doctor?"

Wilfred Starling looked deep into the eyes of his visitor. His sense of excitement was unbounded. He felt as though all weight had left his Earthly body. He even looked to see if he might be transparent as his visitor was. But his lighter-than-air feeling was only a manifestation of the infinite joy that had smothered him.

The long discussion began. It continued for four days. At first it seemed odd to Doctor Starling that only the major events of four hundred years were being accounted for. But it was soon apparent and logical that major events gave natural birth to millions of minor events. The minor events in turn led to another major event.

During the whole accounting, covering electricity, the law of gravity, the vaccination, the Boston tea party, the Witch trials, Abraham Lincoln, the Pilgrims, Napoleon, Spectrum Analysis, the Quantum Theory, Psychoanalysis and all the great motivating forces and events of four hundred years, Kronosiris gradually moved closer to the truth of what was out of proportion about Doctor Wilfred Starling.

On the fifth day, in the midst of recounting events of



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the twentieth century, the Celestial visitor suddenly halted the proceedings.

Doctor Starling opened his eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Kronosiris regarded him with mixed concern and surprise.

"Something has interrupted your thoughts," he said. "That is quite out of the ordinary inas much as you have been in a trance."

"A trance!"

"Yes, it was necessary for me to utilize a state of hypnosis in order for your mind to operate flawlessly. Yet some deep concern from your conscious was potent enough to penetrate that trance and substantially affect you."

"What was it?"

For the first time during their meeting Kronosiris looked genuinely perplexed.

"You have a defective heart, Doctor Starling."

There was poignancy in Doctor Starling's brief smile.

"Yes, I know. I suppose I worry about it because I'm afraid I won't live long enough to complete my life work."

"It is incredible," said Kronosiris, "for a man of your age to have heart trouble."

The doctor shrugged. "Well, I'm sixty-three years old. I guess I'm lucky to have lasted this long."

"But you're still a young man! Your heart shouldn't trouble you for at least another forty years."

"Forty years!" cried the astonished doctor. "I'll be pretty grateful if I live to be seventy."

Kronosisis' perplexity turned to apprehension, then to subdued annoyance.

"Surely you're not going to sit there and tell me, Doctor, that you don't expect to live out the full measure of your life expectancy!"

"Perhaps," replied the doctor, "but as I said, that's only seven more years at the most."

"The life expectancy on Planet 3981275, Doctor Starling, is one hundred and twenty-five years!" Kronosiris' insistence was a trifle unbecoming for a Celestial visitor.

"One hundred and twenty-five years!" the doctor exclaimed. "Where in heaven's name did you ever get that idea?"

The visitor's apprehension grew. He knew now what it was about the original image of Doctor Starling that had disturbed him. That great shock of white hair! According to The Great Book the doc-



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tor should not have white hair at his age. Unless it was prematurely white.

"Doctor . . ." Kronosiris tried to remain calm in the face of an unforeseen but catastrophic error . . . ". . . the scientific formula for increasing, in fact doubling, the life expectancy on this planet has been discovered, has it not?"

Even though Starling knew the answer he was slow in delivering it. "No, it has not."

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, Doctor! The Great Book has never been wrong. My own memory has never failed me! I distinctly remember the event." He opened The Great Book and feverishly began to turn pages.

Now the doctor began to worry. He knew Kronosiris must be right and the thought of it terrified him. He knew and believed in the accuracy of The Great Book. Yet he trembled and went weak inside because he also knew that he himself could not possibly have been ignorant of such a milestone in man's progress.

Kronosiris spun the pages by with an implacable determination. He had to be right! How could it be any other way? There had never been a mistake! There could not be a mistake now!

He stopped.

Vindication formed a tight smile on his lips.

"You see," he began, "it is right here. We would have accounted for this event by this evening." He looked into the Book and read: "The formula for increasing the life expectancy of the human being to one hundred and twenty-five years . . ."

Doctor Starling took an uncertain step toward the visitor. "Who discovered the formula?"

Kronosiris continued to read from the book. "Discovered and perfected by Toshio Yanase on the Eighth day of August, 1945, in a laboratory in Hiroshima, Japan."

He smiled a smile of Infinite satisfaction, closed The Great Book and turned to his host. "Now then, Doctor, about your heart. . . ."

**THE END**



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# REVOLT OF THE SYNTHETICS

By RALPH BURKE

*You've built an android and turned it out by the thousands to harvest your grain and do your work. Subservience is the keynote of this model. But it revolts and threatens to annihilate you. Can you find the error in time to save your own life?*

*THE androids were lying down on the job.* That was Dave Thornton's first thought, as he rounded the bend and came to the grainfields. Suddenly, the neat report he had filed that morning was worthless, as were all his evaluations. A current of anger throbbed through him.

He paused for a moment at the edge of the road, blinking with surprise. The androids, sure enough, were lying in the field, stretching their golden-yellow plastic bodies out with lazy content.

It didn't figure. It didn't figure at all—and it left him in a hell of a mess. Thornton broke into a trot and dashed out into the field, scattering the newly-cut haystacks every which way as he ran.

He stopped at the first android he came across, reached down, and jerked the synthetic man up.

"Why aren't you working?" Thornton demanded. "Who ordered you to take a rest?"

"No one ordered us, bossman," the android said slowly. "We just thought it was time for a little break."

"So we sat down," chimed in another android, coming up from one side. "From now on we only work when we want to."

Thornton looked uneasily from one android to another. He was there supposedly only as an observer, to determine the relative superiority of the synthetic androids over the metallic robots on the farmlands of Kybor. So far the test had gone splendidly, with



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the crew of androids far outstripping in production the robots they were replacing. But now this sudden reversal had come, and it looked as though he were going to get involved—and dangerously.

The androids were gathering in a little clump around him, and their bland yellow faces showed expressions of menace. Thornton backed away a step.

"Just what's going on here?" he asked coldly, wishing he'd been smart enough to pack a blaster.

"You heard us the first time," said one of the androids. "It's a new policy we're instituting — effective now."

"But you have no right to do any such thing! I'm ordering you to get back to work!"

None of them moved.

"That's a direct order from a human being," Thornton said. "You can't disobey it!"

One of the androids chuckled. "Oh, can't we?" The android reached out and nudged Thornton roughly in the chest. "Who says?"

Not believing this could be happening, Thornton shoved the android's arm away from himself. It was incredible to suppose that the placid, carefully-trained androids could be capable of refusing a direct human order.

The android pushed him again. Thornton angrily slapped the cool hand away, and suddenly felt a fist in his teeth.

He lashed out with a right and landed it, hard, on the androids rubbery jaw; the android went rocking back, and another took its place. Thornton looked around and saw that he was in the middle of a semicircle of jeering androids. It was like a dream, being attacked by these subservient creatures.

Thornton pulled the nearest one toward him, hurled it backward into the semicircle, and at the same moment felt a stinging blow on the back of his neck.

He whirled, took a grazing punch on his cheek, and drove a fist into the android's stomach. Then, before any further trouble could develop, he broke through the ring and dashed across the field to his tractor.

The androids didn't pursue; Thornton looked back and saw them laughing uproariously to themselves, as they once again stretched out comfortably on the ground in the warm midday sun.

He drove grimly back to the



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Administration House with the derisive cries of the androids still echoing in his ears. It had all happened too suddenly for his mind to assimilate the situation properly, and all he could think was that a pleasant, soft job had suddenly turned into a nightmare.

Thornton and his wife had come to Kybor, a small, agricultural planet in the Procyon system, a month before. He had been hired by the Donovan Food Cartel to study the practicality of replacing the farming robots with the newly-developed synthetic androids. During the test period, Thornton and his wife had been installed in the home of Ed Chesley, the local Planetary Supervisor, who was the only Earthman on the planet permanently. It was Chesley's job to see to it that the grain was shipped out; he had the little planet to himself.

Things had rolled along smoothly for three weeks, with the androids, intelligent, almost-human beings, learning the farm routines fantastically fast and turning in almost double the yield the old clanking robots had. So far it looked like a clear victory for the android manufacturers, and an overwhelming setback for the robotics boys—for if Thornton's report ruled in favor of androids, the Donovan Cartel would make the changeover on all of its galaxy-wide holdings.

Thornton had started writing the report that morning, praising the androids and comparing them favorably to the robots, whose control farm was doing poorly. But suddenly, for no comprehensible reason, the cooperative androids had ceased being cooperative.

To top everything, Supervisor Chesley, seeing that everything was so well in hand, had left the night before for a short business trip to Denaron, the neighboring planet in the system. So Thornton and his wife were alone on Kybor, and the androids were in revolt.

It was a sorely-worried Dave Thornton who jogged up the steps of the Administration House in search of his wife.

He ran inside, bolting the door behind him. The first voice he heard was that of the house-robot, a clinking, seven-foot heap of tin who did menial tasks.

"Where's your mistress?" Thornton asked.

The robot slowly opened its mouth and rumbled, in halt-



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ing syllables, "She is upstairs."

Without waiting for any more information, Thornton raced up the stairs to the second floor of the big house. Nina's probably in the microfilm library, he thought, and upon entering the darkened room he found he was right. She was sitting attentively in the back, watching a reel of some old Earth novel. She really went for them.

Startled at the intrusion, Nina looked up. Then she saw Thornton's battered appearance.

"What happened, darling? What ever—"

Hastily, he told her the whole story—how the androids refused to work, how they were growing violent when he had made his escape.

He watched her, saw her face change, take on a look of blank incomprehension. Nina had had a pleasant life; she came from a rich merchant family, and he had met her while she was vacationing on one of the pleasure-worlds of the Arcturus system. Thornton's job was a good one, and their life had been an uncomplicated, happy one —until now.

"But they can't rebel," she protested. "They're supposed to respect humans. They're *conditioned!*"

"Someone must have unconditioned them," Thornton said tightly. "Those androids have been tampered with. They wouldn't change so radically overnight for absolutely no reason!"

"But who would do such a thing?"

"Don't be naive, darling. Who do you think might have a motive for wrecking the android test?"

Nina, puzzled, shrugged her shoulders. "Who?"

"Who else but the robot manufacturers, of course," Thornton said.

The answer had occurred to him a moment before, as he had revolved the situation in his mind. There was no reason why the peaceful androids should suddenly take things into their own synthetic hands, unless some interested party had manipulated them. And the logical villains would be the robot manufacturers, struggling to maintain their industry in the face of the overwhelming competition from the new android marketers.

But how? How?

He walked over to the window, staring out moodily, as if looking for the answer out there. Nina was busily gath-



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ering up the microfilms and putting them away.

Somehow the robot makers had smuggled an agent onto Kybor, to tinker with the androids. Thornton angrily determined that he was going to find that agent.

He glanced out at the dusty road, and then took a sharper look. Yes—he'd been right at first glance. An army of androids was tramping merrily up the road, waving flails and shovels, singing wildly. Some of them were c a r r y i n g torches.

A moment later, the house was surrounded.

They were singing, "We don't have to work! We don't have to work!" *Like children,* Thornton thought. *Children on vacation from school.*

Nina was sobbing quietly in the corner. "Why'd we come here, Dave? Why couldn't we have taken that other job? The one on Earth?"

"Quiet, baby," Thornton said, concealing his impatience with her. He knew he had to be gentle; poor spoiled Nina had never been under any sort of strain before in her life, and she was reacting predictably.

The androids were pounding on the walls below, marching around, having a generally good time of it. They didn't seem particularly malicious yet, but they had Thornton holed up and they were determined to make the most of it, apparently. And those torches were a potential menace.

The only way to save things was to find out what had been done to the androids, and counteract it. That would mean some fast talking, and perhaps some speedy running as well.

Uneasily, he walked across the hall to his own room, and dropped down at his desk. His report was open in front of him, and he smiled ironically at the words of praise he had written about the androids that morning. He pushed the sheet away.

*He* couldn't go outside, not in that raging mob. But he had someone who could. Thornton reached over and depressed the button that would bring the house-robot clanking up the stairs, and waited.

The robot appeared a few minutes later.

"Yes, sir?" it grated ponderously.

"Go outside," Thornton ordered. Quickly he outlined what he wanted done, and the



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robot nodded its acknowledgment gravely and moved out.

As the metal servant left, Nina entered. "What's happening?" she asked.

"I'm setting a trap for a rat," he said. "Now I've got to get some cheese."

He opened the closet and began fumbling in the supply cabinet.

"What are you looking for, dear?"

"Sodium amytal," Thornton said. "Truth serum. I just sent the robot downstairs to catch one of those androids and bring him back up here. We'll get to the heart of the matter soon enough."

Thornton hoped he sounded confident enough; inwardly he was worried, but he didn't want Nina to know that. He began preparing the solution for injection when the captive android appeared.

Outside, there was the sound of loud thumping, as if of shovels clanging off the robot's impervious metal skin, and then an outraged roar went up from the crowd of androids. Thornton heard the door slam, and the loud pounding of the robot's treads on the stairs.

A minute later the robot entered, pushing before it a captured android. The synthetic men all looked roughly alike, and so Thornton had no way of telling, but it seemed to him that the one the robot had grabbed was the one who had originally threatened him in the field. The robot had one metal claw wrapped firmly around each of the android's arms.

The struggling android glared defiantly at Thornton. "Tell your tin man to let go of me, boss-man!"

"I'll give the orders," Thornton said. "Hold still." He lifted the hypodermic and brought it over to the android.

"What are you going to do?"

Thornton said nothing, but slid the needle effortlessly into the smooth flesh until he reached a vein. He released the contents of the hypodermic into the android's artificial bloodstream, and withdrew the needle. The android's self-sealing flesh immediately closed over.

"You can let go of him now," Thornton said, and the robot released its prisoner. The android rocked unsteadily for a moment, then took a seat. Thornton stood over him.

He glared down. "Why did you rebel?" he asked sharply.

"The man . . . told us to,"



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the android said, obviously unwilling but unable to control itself. "He said it would be better not to work."

"What man?"

"The tall one . . . Ledyard. He came to us last week, and talked to us."

Ledyard! It rang a bell, all right. Simon Ledyard was the son of one of the biggest robot manufacturers; he had inherited the factory the year before, and had fought the development of androids bitterly.

"What did he tell you?"

"He . . . said we didn't need to work. And he gave us something to drink, and we felt free. We didn't want to work any more, the way we had before."

Thornton frowned. So Ledyard was here, and had drugged the androids? "Where is this man now?"

The android made an apparent effort to hold back the information, but the drug proved too much to withstand. "He is . . . among us. Wearing our clothing. Looking like us."

Ledyard was disguised as an android? Here, plying his job of corrupting the androids, hoping to sway Thornton's judgment when he made out his deciding report? Thornton frowned; Ledyard's plan was going to backfire, if *he* had anything to do about it!

Thornton was angry, now. He had come here as a detached, impartial observer. But the devil with that, now; the androids downstairs had been stirred up to riot peak (he heard their wild roaring drifting upstairs) and Ledyard's wily scheming had put Thornton and Nina in deadly danger.

Suddenly Thornton realized the full magnitude of the plot. Ledyard wasn't concerned merely with influencing Thornton's decision. Oh, no—he wanted the androids to *kill* the observer, to show to the watching galaxy that they were entirely undependable as labor forces.

Thornton would have to fight his way out. The androids had been conditioned to serve humans. Ledyard had given them some sort of drug to counteract that conditioning.

Thornton glanced over at the white-faced figure of Nina. "Get the microscope set up," he told her. "I'm going to make a chemical examination of this android's blood."

Fifteen minutes later, he knew. It was a hydrocarbon-base drug that broke down



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the intricate neural path of the android brains, released their inhibitions, killed their work-drive. It would take about two weeks for the damaged neurons to knit together—and by that time Thornton would have been gone, with his report blasting the androids and recommending that the Cartel stick with the safer robots. Or Thornton would be dead at an android's hand, which would accomplish the same thing infinitely more permanently.

Quickly he explained the situation to Nina.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"I've got to talk to the androids, convince them that they've been bamboozled by Ledyard."

"They'll kill you if you go down there!"

"I'll address them from the balcony," Thornton said. "I've got to win them back to our sympathies, or else we're finished. Ledyard's out there somewhere in that crowd, and he's probably busy inciting them to burn down the house right now."

"If he does that," Nina said, "and word gets around the galaxy that androids killed humans, it'll finish the android industry forever!"

"That's just what Ledyard wants." He walked to the window and looked out. The androids were milling dangerously around below. He threw open the big windows and stepped out, ignoring Nina's worried exclamations.

He was greeted by catcalls and a sprinkling of stones from below. They bounced around him, but he managed to duck them all and hold up a hand for silence. He drew his blaster and pointed it at the captive android.

"Quiet! And listen to me—or I'll cook this hostage here."

That only seemed to redouble their fury. Another shower of stones came from below, one of them nipping his shoulder and stunning him for a moment. "You'd do it, too," shouted one of the androids from below.

"Slavedriver!" they yelled. "Murderer!"

That line of approach had failed—and Thornton knew he'd have to get their sympathy in a hurry. He held up his hands again. "Listen to me—if you want to save your own lives!" he roared. "Or do you want to get killed?"

He saw a change of expression on some of the golden faces below, as if they were now curious to hear him out. The appeal to their reason had worked, where the appeal



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to their sympathies for their fellow android hadn't.

"You've cut your own throats!" Thornton went on. "You've let this Ledyard come among you and corrupt you—not realizing that as soon as word of this revolt gets around, all of you will be killed and all androids replaced by robots again!"

Suddenly they fell silent, as the impact of Thornton's bellowed words sank into their chemical-colloid brains. A few malcontents still muttered angrily, but most were quiet. Seizing the moment of silence as an opportunity, Thornton went on.

"You've almost ruined things for yourself. But not quite. You still have a chance to save yourselves from the acid vat—if you'll repudiate Ledyard!"

A few stones came up at that, but Thornton saw curious faces in the crowd, and some of them asked, "How?" *The tide is turning,* Thornton thought, weary from the strain.

"*First:* end your rebellion.

"*Second:* come up here and receive an injection that will counteract the drug Ledyard gave you.

"*Third:* return to work as before."

"And what's in it for us?" one skeptical android called out.

"In return," Thornton said, "I promise to see to it that androids are manufactured on large scale to replace robots in industry! I will turn in a favorable report."

Behind him he heard Nina's gasp. "How can you?" she asked. "After the way they've rebelled!"

"I know what I'm doing," he whispered. He turned back to the androids below. "You've heard my terms? What do you say?"

They roared their approval loudly.

"What's this injection business?" Nina asked.

"A placebo—a blank," said Thornton. "Pure distilled water, nothing else. It's valuable psychologically; they'll *think* they've been reconditioned, and they'll go back to work willingly."

"How'd you manage to win them over so easily?" she asked.

"Ledyard's drug only releases their inhibitions and deconditions them, but it doesn't make them necessarily rebellious, if it's to their advantage not to rebel. It doesn't destroy their common sense. They know when they're in danger, all right,



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and as soon as I showed them what the real score was they gave in. We still can't count Ledyard out, though. I want to catch him and keep him from stirring them up again, now that they're orderly."

There was a knock on the door. Thornton opened it and saw a long line of androids waiting, stretching down the stairs and around out of sight. He gestured to the house-robot.

"Admit them one by one," he said.

The first android came in, closing the door behind it. Thornton dipped his syringe in the bowl of distilled water he had prepared, and with great show injected it into the android's arm. The needle sank in easily, and he withdrew it after the injection.

The android looked up at him. "Thank you, sir. We've been talking, and we're just as anxious to find Ledyard as you are, now. He could have had us all destroyed, if we had listened to him."

"Exactly," said Thornton. "I'm glad you see that. Next android," he said to the robot.

The first android left, and the second took its place. Then the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth. Thornton continued the injections impassively, watching with much inward amusement Nina's completely puzzled face.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth androids moved through just as quickly. The tenth, though, was somewhat hesitant. Thornton looked up suspiciously as he saw the android slink warily into the room.

He prepared the injection, while the android held up its golden-skinned arm. Then Thornton brought the needle down, and inserted it. He stared at the arm, and reacted instantly.

"Okay, grab him," Thornton commanded the house robot. "There's the phony!"

Immediately the pseudo-android recoiled, and as the big robot moved ponderously toward him, Ledyard darted forward and threw the cutoff switch. *Of course,* Thornton thought angrily. *A robot manufacturer would know exactly how to do that.*

"You're very clever, Thornton," Ledyard said. "I don't know how you saw through the disguise, but you did." He backed away toward the door, moving around the motionless robot.

"You won't get anywhere, Ledyard," Thornton said. A torrent of rage surged through him, and he reached out at the other man. He



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heard Nina's scream in the background.

Ledyard's fist came up and caught him in the midsection. Thornton grunted, recovered his breath, and answered with a swift punch to the chest, and Ledyard bounced back.

They circled around in the little room, each looking for an advantage.

Thornton flicked out a tentative fist and struck home, but it didn't bother Ledyard. The robot manufacturer was taller and longer-armed; he was built almost to the specifications of an average android, and achieving the right skin-color must have been a simple matter of dye.

Then they came together in a clinch, and Thornton felt the other man's fists pounding away at his stomach. Dimly, through the haze of pain and anger, he saw Nina move behind them and open the door. *It's just like her to run away,* Thornton thought bitterly. *The girl's soft. I didn't think she was such a weakling when I married her.*

But, to his surprise, Nina wasn't running away. She had simply opened the door, and she was gesturing to Thornton to push Ledyard through it. He caught on.

He parried a blow to the chin and answered with one just above the heart, and began to push Ledyard toward the open door with a series of short jabs. Ledyard replied to them, but kept retreating.

Then he stopped, braced himself, and began to drive Thornton back. Half-crazed with anger and h a t r e d, Thornton leaped forward and dug his fingers into Ledyard's shoulders. He began to push desperately, forcing the bigger man back, back—

And then, with a mighty shove, he sent Ledyard flying through the door, catapulting into the corridor—straight into the arms of the waiting androids.

"He's all yours!" Thornton cried.

There was a joyous, chilling outcry, followed by a single awful scream.

And then all was silent.

Thornton looked up at the cultured, plump face of Ed Chesley, the local Supervisor, two days later.

"They're all back on the job now, Ed. I had some of them bury Ledyard, but they weren't anxious to do it. God, how they hated him once I was able to show them they were c u t t i n g their own throats by listening to him!"

"It was a messy way to die," Chesley said. "I suppose


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it's my fault for having left, but it would have happened anyway. Ledyard was a no-good rabble-rouser; I don't imagine there'll be any repercussions when this gets out."

The Supervisor walked up and down, examining the damage that had been done to his house in the melee during his absence. He turned to Thornton.

"It's ironic, Dave—that despite Ledyard's grisly end, he achieved what he set out to do. I imagine you'll have to recommend continuing use of robots anyway now; they're not as efficient as androids, but they can't be tampered with and so they're much safer."

Thornton shook his head, grinning. "Dead wrong. I promised the androids I'd recommend them for general use, and I'm keeping that promise."

"But how can you?" Nina and Chesley said almost at once, in evident bewilderment.

"The androids can be modified so they won't be susceptible to the drug Ledyard used, and then they'll be perfectly safe. But more important, if we educate our androids properly, they'll know it's for their own good to keep serving us, or else they'll be replaced with robots again. They'll understand; they reason almost as well as humans, and robots can't think at all."

Chesley nodded. "Sounds convincing to me. But the robotics men won't like it."

"Too bad," Thornton said. "But robots are obsolete, as of now. They'll just have to face that harsh reality."

"Just one thing that's puzzling me," Nina said.

Thornton turned to face his wife. He was looking at her with new respect in his eyes, because she had grown up in that moment of struggle. She had known what would happen to Ladyard if she opened the door, and yet she had done it anyway, since it was the only thing to do.

"What's that, Nina?"

"How did you know that the tenth android was really Ledyard?"

Thornton smiled. "Simplicity itself, my dear Mrs. Thornton. When I stuck that needle in his arm, a tiny droplet of blood appeared. *Androids don't bleed.*"

**THE END**



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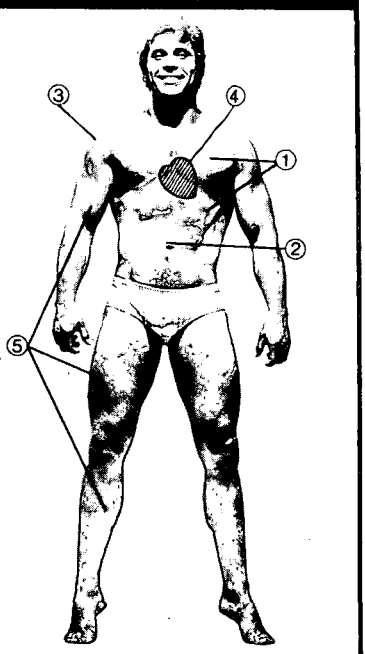


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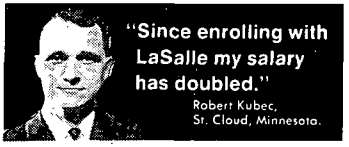


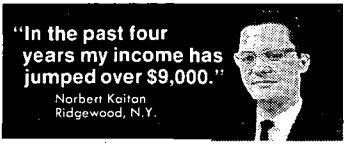


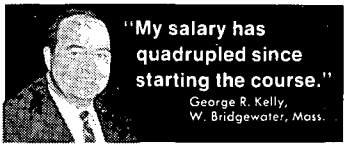


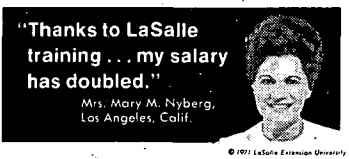


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